ANCIENT GREECE AND AMERICAN CONSERVATISM

Classical Influence on the Modern Right

JOHN BLOXHAM

I.B.TAURIS

John Bloxham is Associate Lecturer teaching Classics and Politics at the Open University. He received his PhD from the University of Nottingham in 2016.

'John Bloxham's timely and original study of the engagement of postwar American conservatism with the ideas of ancient Greece will be essential reading for anyone interested in US political history or in the enduring influence of classical philosophy on the modern world'.

Patrick Finglass, Henry Overton Wills Professor of Greek and Head of the Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Bristol

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Tim Rood, Professor of Greek Literature, University of Oxford

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For Andrea

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INTRODUCTION

The thought of what America would be like
If the Classics had a wide circulation
Troubles my sleep

Ezra Pound, from 'Cantico del Sole' (1918)

Despite Pound's 'would be like', the Classics have on some level always had a wide circulation in America, as a stroll around the neoclassical splendour of Washington, DC or a review of the contemporary debates surrounding the establishment of the US Constitution will quickly make plain. What Pound's narrator was worried about was that the 'wrong' people might develop an interest in Antiquity and, when a wide circulation of the Classics has included the American Right, Pound's narrator was not the only victim of insomnia. Newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic apportioned at least some of the blame for the Bush administration's apparent deception in its argument for the invasion of Iraq to the Greek philosopher Plato. In this version of events, a shady, elitist group of neoconservatives in the Bush administration lied about weapons of mass destruction because they were followers of Plato's 'noble lie', obligating them to practise deceit upon the cerebrally-challenged masses. But it was not always the fault of the ancients. The American classicist Page duBois was in no doubt that conservatives of the 1980s and 1990s had subverted classical texts for their own nefarious ends, as her title made clear: *Trojan Horses: Saving the Classics from Conservatives.*[1]

The objective of this book is nothing so partisan. Instead, the aim is to illuminate the history of ancient Greek ideas and examples used by

American conservatives from the aftermath of World War II to the administration of George W. Bush. I will trace patterns in the appropriation of Greek thought, reading such receptions alongside Greek texts and analysing examples of selectivity, subversion and adaptation within their broader contexts. I concentrate attention on the ways that some conservative intellectuals have used classical Greek thought in different ways at different periods. This work is not an all-encompassing history of American conservative intellectuals, and even less so a comprehensive history of American conservatism. However, although not all conservatives turned to Greece, enough did, and their appropriations were so extensive that an examination of their engagement sheds considerable light on American conservatism as a whole. The questions underlying this investigation centre on the profundity (or otherwise) of the conservative engagement with Greece, why the Greeks were turned to so often, and how these appropriations can be valuable in building a richer understanding of American conservatism.

Methodology

In its approach, this book is indebted to the fields of classical reception studies, the history of the classical tradition and the study of intellectual history more broadly. The first two of these might require a little explanation for readers new to Classics. Classical reception studies has, over the past 30 years, advanced from its small niche in the discipline of Classics to become one of its most vibrant sub-disciplines. The history of reception theory is commonly traced back to radical literary theorists of the 1960s and 1970s. In 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', Hans Robert Jauss outlined his intention to move away from literary approaches which privileged authorial intent and the discovery of the inherent meanings of texts. Instead, he argued for a history of reception which would focus upon the expectations of readers based on their pre-existing understandings of similar works.[2] In reality, this belief in the unanchored nature of textual meaning could be traced back further and wider. Reception theory can be seen as another descendant, alongside deconstruction, post-structuralism, and post-modernism, of the relativist metaphysical turn taken by Friedrich Nietzsche and developed by Martin Heidegger. In this tradition, literary texts did not contain essential meanings which were simply waiting to be discovered.

On the contrary, meaning is imposed by the reader who constructs their own interpretation, influenced by the interpretations of earlier readers.

There are distinct methodological and terminological challenges involved in using reception theory for a study of conservative thought. One is that it is fundamentally antithetical to the commonly held conservative belief in absolute truths. This has been a recurring motif in conservative thought, but it is at odds with the relativistic textual readings of reception theory. Consequently, a reception-centred approach to conservative thought will not only be sceptical of conservative claims to truth, but is likely to actively oppose such claims. As should become clear, this work makes a conscious effort to maintain a detachment from the arguments over such claims, giving both sides of the issue where possible and refraining from value judgements.

In their shared focus on historical context, there are similarities between classical reception and some intellectual history approaches. In particular, it has been argued that the 'history of political thought' approach of Skinner and the Cambridge School can complement classical reception theory.[3] As well as examining the works of those conservative theorists considered important, both at the time and subsequently (the two are not identical), I examine the political context in which they were writing, agreeing with Skinner that 'political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate'.[4] Nevertheless, this approach on its own could justifiably be criticized for being too deterministic. At its most excessive, it removes both the agency of the subjects studied as well as any special attributes of the original source material with which they engaged.

To help avoid this potential pitfall, this book is also informed by the 'classical tradition' approach. Although the study of reception is a relatively new discipline, the study of the transmission of texts and ideas from Antiquity is not. In this older approach much more emphasis is placed on the illustrious and revered aspects of Antiquity, which is also the attitude that conservatives have tended to adopt. There are overlaps with reception, but the key difference is this focus on value, with a recent work arguing that 'whereas "classical" and "tradition" tend to prompt considerations of value, "reception" does not. In a nutshell, the "classical" of "the classical tradition" tends to imply canonicity.'[5] Thus reception studies is more concerned with how context affects the receiver's reception

of Antiquity, whereas studies of the classical tradition are more interested in how the tradition influences the reception of the reader (which can clearly interact with the context). There are examples where context alters readings, and highlighting such instances was originally the dominant aim of this work. However, the tradition puts its own demands on its receivers; it does have a life of its own. Even when it cannot force readers to alter their views, it can force them into corners which become evident by what they leave out or subvert: an active engagement on the part of the receiver does not necessarily mean that the thing received is so infinitely elastic that it can be bent into any shape at all. This is perhaps more the case with appropriations of political thought, where original intent and meaning have a degree of concreteness which are not as easy to reconfigure as, say, a work of art. This tendency of the classical tradition approach to question the influence of Antiquity is something considered throughout this study.

In summary, this book combines aspects of these three methodological approaches. Firstly, it will work from particular examples of conservative reception to look for patterns; secondly, it will map the influence of contemporary issues in shaping these patterns; and, thirdly, it will analyse the nexus between the patterns and their contexts by comparison with their source texts, remaining alert to any pressure exerted by the essential nature of the source texts, as well as their subsequent reception history, in shaping reader responses. Some work has been done within this area in recent years; but, influenced by the impact of the 'neoconservatives' on American policy during the Bush II administration, it has focused on the influence of the followers of Leo Strauss on American foreign policy (explored in Chapter 5). Other receptions of classical thought in American conservatism have been much less thoroughly studied. As we saw at the beginning of this introduction, where thinkers have focused on the Right, they have tended to be hypercritical, which has occasionally led to a distorted image. For example, one classicist described duBois' 2001 work as a book about the 'appropriation of Greek civic values by extremists in the USA'.[6] This might lead an unwary reader to imagine that duBois was providing an analysis of Greek thought being used by the Ku Klux Klan or gun-obsessed militiamen. In fact, it was a critique of mainstream Republicans such as William Bennett, Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration. I employ a more neutral approach.

This work also rejects the related tendency among some political historians to discount the inherent validity of conservative ideas. An excellent example of this occurred in Richard J. Hofstadter's classic work, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*,[7] which essentially diagnosed conservatism as a psychological condition. More recently, Thomas Frank[8] has argued that US Republicans have used social issues such as abortion in order to divert their voters' attention away from what should be their 'real' economic concerns. These and similar materialist critiques of American conservatism have in common a somewhat condescending and deterministic perspective in which neither conservative ideas, nor the reasoning of the people who espouse them, are taken seriously.

Definitional Issues

Conservatives

One of the earliest obstacles encountered in any account of conservatism is the lack of a definition that is close to being definitive. This is due to its amorphous, evolving and disputed nature. As Nietzsche observed, 'only that which has no history can be defined'.[9] Historians of American conservatism have tended to focus on the impossibility of providing a clear-cut definition: it is a 'continually evolving and complex political phenomenon',[10] there is no 'single, satisfactory, all-encompassing definition' since it 'varies enormously with time and place',[11] and it is 'a protean, socially constructed category which takes on new connotations and sheds old ones over time without retaining any definitional core that transcends historical context'.[12] In contrast, attempts to find an all-encompassing definition have tended to reduce American conservatism to a simplistic dichotomy. According to O'Sullivan, American conservatism is 'unified by a common object of hostility: namely, the progressive view of humankind and society ... [which] vastly exaggerates the directive power of human reason, on the one hand, and the creative power of human will, on the other'.[13] Today's conservative movement can be seen as an alliance of libertarians, neoconservatives and traditionalists. The libertarians have tended to be classically liberal. They are committed to free-market principles and have tended to place a much lower value on the importance of religion and the integrity of the family (or, at least, to believe that government should not actively

intervene to support the family). And neoconservatives have likewise often been respectful rather than actively supportive of religious issues and, in contrast to libertarians and traditionalists, have not always placed property rights or the size of government at the forefront of their agenda.

Even reducing 'true' conservatism to its traditionalist wing does not entirely clarify matters. On the most straightforward, literal reading, conservatives want to conserve the existing political order; but, as the existing political order is constantly changing, the things conservatives want to preserve inevitably change too. On this basis, a loyal Soviet apparatchik *c.*1979 might be more conservative than a Margaret Thatcher of the same time … a notion rightly rejected by common sense. If conservatism means defending traditional, as opposed to simply existing, values we do not get much further ahead (how long would the USSR have had to exist before its guiding principles became the 'traditional' values of Russia?) For the British conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott, conservatism is a set of attitudes rather than principles. Conservatives prefer 'the familiar to the unknown', 'fact to mystery', the 'near to the distant', and 'present laughter to utopian bliss'.[14] This may be too generalized to pass muster. Edmund Burke is usually considered the originator of conservative philosophy, but contrasting his principles with those of modern conservatives throws up discrepancies. According to one work on American conservatism, Burke's thought was marked by six principles: he was suspicious of state power; he preferred liberty to equality; he was patriotic; he had a strong faith in existing institutions; he was sceptical of the idea of progress; and he was elitist. However, the writers went on to argue that modern American conservatism differs from Burkean conservatism because the former overstates the importance of the first three principles and contradicts the remainder.[15] According to William Chamberlin, an American conservative thinker writing in the 1960s, 'conservatism at all times and in all countries has stood for religion, patriotism, the integrity of the family and respect for private property as the four pillars of a sound and healthy society'.[16] This seems to bring us closer to the American experience, but is perhaps still only applicable because it is so unspecific.

Intellectuals

This book focuses upon intellectuals rather than politicians. This may seem surprising given the long history of anti-intellectual tirades on the

Right; and the very term 'conservative intelligentsia' may appear to be an oxymoron according to some social science literature on intellectual movements. In this literature, intelligentsia is often defined according to its radical role in mobilizing the masses against the status quo. According to Mannheim, the 'conservative mentality as such has no predisposition towards theorizing' because people tend not to theorize about situations to which they are well adjusted.[17] Likewise, according to Aleksander Gella, an intelligentsia only arises in a society when the educated establishment are unable to solve that society's problems. That new intelligentsia is 'characterized by an objective form of alienation which results both in a negative or revolutionary attitude toward the ruling establishment and in the rejection of the traditionally conservative way of life'.[18] A conservative intelligentsia would thus represent a paradox. However, if we see American conservatism as a response to the postwar, liberal consensus, its development in the 1950s and its anti-establishment rhetoric do fit at least part of the model for progressive intelligentsias.

Unsurprisingly, Seymour Lipset, a neoconservative sociologist, saw a possibility for an intelligentsia of the Right: although 'intellectuals are rarely defenders of the status quo', there are examples of rightist intellectual formations. Nonetheless, conservatives tend to develop their arguments in opposition to radicals and are less critical.[19] Hugh Seton-Watson provided a broader yet more exact definition, defining the intelligentsia as 'a small inner elite or self-styled elite of writers and cultural dignitaries'.[20] I will argue that a conservative intelligentsia, made up of academics, journalists, popular writers and think-tank researchers, has developed in the United States since the 1940s.

Once the notion of a conservative intelligentsia is accepted, Gramsci's sketch of the role of the intelligentsia in political movements becomes an excellent description of the American conservative movement:

> A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is, without organisers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory–practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people 'specialized' in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas.[21]

According to Gramsci, intellectuals and wider groups join together to form a 'historic bloc'. The alliance formed by conservative intellectuals, business interests and the Republican Party in the 1950s was just such a bloc.

Structure

This book is organized thematically; however, its themes often follow in a rough chronological order, with limited chronological overlap between the five chapters. Chapter 1 examines the period of the early Cold War, exploring the issues of absolute versus relative values and freedom versus censorship. The early part of the chapter considers Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), the first important traditionalist conservative work published after World War II. The second half of the chapter looks at the use of Plato's Socrates in the 1950s to defend Senator McCarthy's anti-communist investigations. Chapter 2 continues to explore the conservative critique of relativism using the reception of Greek thought in the writings of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss from the 1940s to the early 1970s. Chapter 3 investigates the attempt to use Aristotle to develop a more virtue-oriented social science by the group of formerly left-wing intellectuals who became known as neoconservatives in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 4 assesses the reception of Plato's *Republic* and ideas of Greece more generally within the educational 'Culture Wars' of 1980s America. Finally, Chapter 5 turns to the foreign policy arena, examining the events and discussions surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in which Greece and Greek thought were used in three distinct but sometimes complementary ways: how Athens was used as a preferred model for America's benign hegemony, to be contrasted with imperial Rome; how Thucydides was used as both a tough-minded realist and as an idealist; and how the works of Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle were used to develop a theory of regime which justified American aggression against tyrannical states in order to spread democracy. As will become clear from this study, Greek thought can be a clarifying prism through which to refract and explore the competing strands of American conservatism.

CHAPTER 1

PLATO'S IDEAS HAD CONSEQUENCES: GREEK THOUGHT AND THE 'NEW CONSERVATIVES'

> In the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition. For it is the plain fact that nowadays there are no conservative or reactionary ideas in general circulation.
>
> Lionel Trilling (1951)[1]

Ideas Have Consequences, written in 1948 by Richard M. Weaver (1910–63), was written as 'another book about the dissolution of the West'.[2] Perhaps in part due to this deep cultural pessimism, it became one of the key texts in the formation of the modern American conservative movement. For students of classical reception, the interest in Weaver lies in his deep respect for Plato as a towering figure in Western civilization. Weaver claimed that the crux of conservatism lay in accepting that Plato's 'Forms' were more real than the material world. As he claimed in a subsequent work, 'the true conservative is one who sees the universe as a paradigm of essences, of which the phenomenology of the world is a sort of continuing approximation'.[3] In *Ideas Have Consequences* Western decline originated in the abandonment of Plato's Forms in the Middle Ages. The subsequent dominance of moral relativism led directly to the decaying world of the twentieth century.

Weaver's choices of classical models reveal American conservatism at a crossroads, full of possibilities but hinting at drawbacks that would hinder it in the decades ahead. Whilst Aristotle would, in many ways, have better suited Weaver's project, Weaver's antipathy to modern science made the proto-scientific Aristotle deeply suspect. Instead, Weaver had to rely entirely upon a generalized adherence to the authority of Plato's Forms, and he was forced to ignore or elide other important Platonic interpretations that did not fit his agenda. For other conservatives, Plato was often simply used as a stamp of authority, useful because of his status as an important thinker in the Western tradition. This chapter surveys some of these fairly superficial uses, as well as the more substantial engagement with Plato by Willmoore Kendall in response to Karl Popper's (1902–94) attacks on Plato as an enemy of freedom. Kendall was a supporter of Joseph McCarthy (1908–57), who led a high profile campaign to unmask and force out communists from positions of authority in the 1950s. Kendall used Plato's depiction of Socrates' trial and death to mount a defence of McCarthyism. Finally, I discuss how these interpretations were themselves received within the wider conservative movement.

The Political Context

The position of conservatism in America following World War II was paradoxical. As an ideology capable of influencing policy it was in retreat; but America still remained in many respects a conservative country – religious, strong on self-reliance, and distrustful of large-scale government-led change. Socialism, despite what critics of the New Deal asserted, remained weak; 'socialist' was an insult in both major parties and socialist candidates had fared poorly in presidential elections, reaching a 2.2 per cent peak share of the popular vote in 1932 but subsequently falling to 0.25 per cent in 1944 and 0.30 per cent in 1948. The difficulty for conservatives was that their own position appeared, with some exaggeration, as only marginally more promising. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s had fundamentally shifted the way American government functioned. The share of American GDP taken by the federal government increased dramatically, from around 12 per cent in the 1920s to over 20 per cent during the New Deal, and spending at the state level also increased. There was also a less obvious but similarly

significant increase in government regulation over different facets of people's lives, which conservatives saw as encroachments upon freedom (for example, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 set limits on the amount of produce farmers could grow on their land, even for personal consumption). America's entry into World War II only intensified the role of government in the economy. The dilemma for conservatives was that these changes were anathema to their philosophy but welcomed by an electoral majority.

Early criticism of the New Deal had stemmed from different, occasionally contradictory, impulses. Whilst libertarian conservatives attacked the growth of government power as a threat to free markets, traditionalist conservatives were often just as venomous about unfettered capitalism as they were about the 'socialistic' New Deal. It is noteworthy that the Southern Agrarian *I'll Take My Stand*[4] was published before the New Deal began, and its writers viewed 'monopoly capitalism' and mass production as the greatest threats to America. Similarly, a group of academics and writers known as the 'New Humanists', writing in the 1920s, were culturally and politically elitist, and were scathing of capitalistic middle-class materialism and mass democracy. Besides these two philosophically opposed blocs, the anti-New Dealers included members of the property-owning classes interested primarily in defending the pre-New Deal status quo. Unsurprisingly, the anti-New Deal response had been disorganized and ineffective. In pursuing a purely negative policy of resistance to change, they did not offer compelling alternative solutions for America's problems.

Both major political parties contained groups sympathetic to at least some conservative aims. But the Democratic Party had been moving further leftwards since the early 1930s and conservative Democrats tended to be southerners who expressed their 'conservatism' through opposition to racial integration (whilst accepting the New Deal reforms deplored by northern conservatives). The Republican Party had initially resisted the New Deal, but suffered electorally in consequence. Indeed, the 1948 presidential election was the fifth Democratic win in succession. And even within the Republican Party, conservatives were being sidelined by apparently more electable moderates. Thomas Dewey, the losing Republican candidate in 1944 and 1948, campaigned on platforms which actually included expanding a number of New Deal policies.

When the Republicans eventually recaptured the presidency following the 1952 election, it was largely thanks to Dwight D. Eisenhower's military prestige. The victory was bittersweet for conservatives because Eisenhower had defeated the more conservative Robert Taft for the Republican nomination and because Eisenhower had no real interest in reversing the New Deal. This failure of conservatives after World War II to wield influence over the Republican Party demonstrated the impotence of conservative ideology at this time, and the death of Taft in 1953 left the conservatives bereft of a nationally significant political voice. Lionel Trilling, a prominent liberal intellectual, could in this period plausibly write the words which opened this chapter.

However, as the 1950s progressed, a conservative intellectual movement began to coalesce. Three distinct groups formed this movement – classical liberals, militant anti-communists (often ex-communists, foreshadowing many neoconservative journeys in the 1960s), and 'New Conservatives', made up of a younger generation of traditionalist writers like Richard Weaver, Russell Kirk, John Hallowell, Peter Viereck and Robert Nisbet.[5] There was some degree of concord, which deepened over time, but also mutual suspicion. Linking the different factions was opposition to government intervention in social and economic problems and a shared suspicion that mainstream institutions were dominated by a 'liberal elite' holding views at odds with the majority. Perhaps the emergence of a stronger conservative movement after its postwar nadir was inevitable, but communist successes from China to Cuba also produced a crisis of confidence which fed political discontent. The 1950s was a period of affluence and peace, but also anxiety – social movements like the anti-nuclear and civil rights movements were forming on the Left, and both sex researcher Alfred Kinsey and *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner found fame in the 1950s, foreshadowing the sexual revolution of the 1960s.[6]

Weaver and the Conservative Revival

Weaver was born in North Carolina and attended the University of Kentucky, before earning a master's degree at Vanderbilt and a PhD at Louisiana State, writing his doctoral thesis on southern writing in the period punctured by the American Civil War. From the 1940s until his

death, Weaver taught in the English department at the University of Chicago, although he returned to his southern roots every summer to farm a plot of land, by mule, in North Carolina. In the early 1930s Weaver had joined the American Socialist Party and as late as 1936 had seriously considered joining the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.[7] Nonetheless, during his PhD studies at Louisiana State, he befriended a number of Southern Agrarians and by 1942 had committed to Southern Agrarianism.[8] The Southern Agrarians were originally a group of writers in the 1930s who romanticized the Old South. They rejected modernism and industrialism in favour of traditional values and the promotion of small-scale farming. Following *Ideas Have Consequences*, Weaver became a leading figure among the 'New Conservatives'.

For later conservatives, three books sowed the seeds from which today's conservative movement sprouted: Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944/1962), Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences* and Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953). The most influential work for postwar classical liberals was *The Road to Serfdom*, which condemned government involvement in the economy as an assault upon individual liberty and a step towards dictatorship. However, despite the book's many conservative followers and their important influence on the ultimate direction of conservatism, some classical liberals resisted the conservative label. They tended to be socially as well as economically liberal, which created tensions with traditionalist, religious conservatives. Hayek actually wrote an essay titled 'Why I am not a Conservative', which contended that liberals were forced to ally with conservatives to protect liberty, but that classical liberalism differed 'as much from true conservatism as from socialism'.[9] Arguments between the two groups continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s but were largely confined to small, right-wing magazines. *Ideas Have Consequences* was consequently the first important and self-consciously conservative text of the postwar period. Willmoore Kendall, a fellow traditionalist conservative, heralded Weaver as the captain 'of the anti-liberal team' upon the book's publication[10] and Frank Meyer, a founding editor of the prominent conservative magazine *National Review*, later viewed Weaver's work as 'the *fons et origo* of the contemporary American conservative movement'. For Meyer, in the postwar years there 'did not exist anything in the nature of a broadly principled, coherent conservative movement', but 'what is remarkable is the extent to which the attitudes and principles

that characterize that movement are prefigured in *Ideas Have Consequences*'.[11]

Weaver's publishers had hoped to achieve a similar impact to Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. The original edition of *The Road to Serfdom* had rapidly sold out and a condensed version was made a *Reader's Digest* 'Book of the Month', resulting in over 1 million copies being sent to subscribers. Weaver's publishers mounted an unprecedented marketing campaign, which included full-page advertisements in *Publisher's Weekly* describing the work as 'one of the most important books we have ever published'; advance copies were sent to booksellers and reviewers accompanied by letters comparing the work in importance to Hayek's; finally, double-page adverts were taken out in all the major literary periodicals. Following this publicity, the book garnered over 100 (mixed) reviews but eventual sales disappointed. Only 8,000 copies were sold in 1948, well below the 30,000 predicted. Nonetheless, it was well received within the small conservative movement and it established Weaver as one of its leading figures.

Platonic Truth versus Modern Relativism

Weaver's thesis boiled down to an argument that a Western thought grounded in Plato's philosophy was one in which the world of the spirit was real. By losing faith in Plato's Forms, the West had lost its attachment to the world of ideas as something real, which led inevitably to the view that all beliefs are relative and therefore worthless. This relativism seeped downwards from the elite and had been combined with mass production and mass culture to create the materialistic, shallow and alienated culture of the twentieth century. He drew comparisons between a decadent modern America and superior aspects of past societies, particularly ancient Greece, medieval Europe and the pre-Civil War American South. According to Weaver, foreshadowing a now familiar conservative criticism of liberal plans for social change, the past 'teaches us to be careful about man's perfectibility and to put a sober estimate on schemes to renovate the species'.[12] Moreover, his disagreement with 'the Whig theory of history [. . .] that the most advanced point in time represents the point of highest development' also suggested the opposite possibility – that the latest point in time might be inferior to the past. For Weaver, an important deficiency of the modern world, in contrast with these earlier societies, was that moderns

had no intellectually consistent basis on which to decide between good and bad. This problem he blamed squarely upon modernity's abandonment of Plato.

For Plato, ideas, or Forms, were more real than the material world, and in the realm of Forms there existed the perfect versions of both material things (for example, the idea of a chair) and concepts (such as the idea of 'justice'). The Forms were pure, unmixed and unchanging.[13] Weaver was not arguing for a return to a particular past, though aspects of the past clearly appealed, but 'toward an ontological realm which is timeless' because, echoing Plato, 'the things' (Plato's Forms) 'of highest value are not affected by the passage of time'.[14] Weaver traced modern decadence back to William of Occam (*c*.1288–*c*.1348), who had denied that Plato's Forms had any real existence. The practical result of Occam's philosophy, nominalism, was that it undermined the reality of logic and only accepted the reality of the senses. Influenced by Occam, 'western man made an evil decision, which has become the efficient and final cause of other evil decisions'.[15]

There was a paradox in Weaver's treatment of Plato. Regardless of the centrality of Plato to his argument, references to Plato's texts were usually implicit or vague, and it is sometimes difficult to establish exactly which idea came from which Platonic work. There are a limited number of direct Platonic references, but none of them concern the book's main argument: the Forms.[16] In these cases, the references to Plato are simply window-dressing. There are also more substansive references to the *Phaedrus* and *Euthyphro* which are more interesting but still unrelated to the Forms. In this way, Plato played a role in Weaver's work which was at once central and shadowy. The essence of his argument, however, which prefigured the later ideas of Leo Strauss and became a central conservative critique of liberalism, was the opposition he posited between conservative, Platonic truth and relativistic, liberal, morally vacuous modernity. Weaver equated the denial of Plato's Forms with both a denial of all spiritual experience and a denial of truth itself.

In determining specific appropriations from Plato, one clue was Weaver's friendship during the writing of *Ideas Have Consequences* with his fellow Chicago professor, Pierre Duhamel, who was 'well versed in medieval Catholic philosophers as well as contemporary Catholic critics'.[17] Though Weaver remained a Protestant, Duhamel introduced him to the Catholic intellectual tradition. Weaver's references to Plato's

Forms may have been taken from the *Timaeus*, which has been the Platonic text most often associated with Christian Neo-Platonism and which includes some of Plato's most vivid descriptions of the Forms. In this dialogue, Timaeus asserts, with Socrates assenting, that the Forms were 'apprehensible by intelligence with the aid of reasoning, being eternally the same', whilst the physical world was 'the object of opinion and irrational sensation, coming to be, but never fully real'. The physical world is only a copy of 'the highest and most completely perfect of intelligible things' and there is 'the unchanging form, uncreated and indestructible, admitting no modification and entering no combination, imperceptible to sight or the other senses'. A physical object resembles its Form, 'but is sensible, has come into existence, is in constant motion, comes into existence in and vanishes from a particular place, and is apprehended by opinion with the aid of sensation'.[18]

It also seems likely that Weaver studied Plato's *Phaedrus.* A reference to the *Phaedrus* was one of the few direct Platonic citations in Weaver's text and in a later work he devoted a chapter to a discussion of the dialogue.[19] In the *Phaedrus*, the realm of the Forms was a real place which was 'the abode of the reality with which true knowledge is concerned, a reality without colour or shape, intangible but utterly real, apprehensible only by intellect which is the pilot of the soul'. The minds of gods can see this place where 'absolute justice and discipline and knowledge, not the knowledge which is attached to things which come into being, nor the knowledge which varies with the objects we now call real, but the absolute knowledge which corresponds to what is absolutely real in the fullest sense' exists.[20] These passages from Plato fit with Weaver's own view of reality, such as that expressed in a letter of 1948, in which he had stated that 'form is prior to substance, and that ideas are determinants'.[21]

Plato's theory of Forms had been integrated into a system complementary to religion at an early date by non-Christian authors such as Philo (first century AD) and Plotinus (third century AD). These neo-Platonic interpretations were integrated into Catholic doctrine by Saint Augustine (AD 354–430). However, as Aristotelian works entered Europe from the twelfth century, these neo-Platonic elements began to be questioned. After initial resistance, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) developed a Christian philosophical school which assimilated the Aristotelian corpus. Aquinas, using Aristotle's modified

theory of Forms, in which matter and form coexist, still accepted that ideas had a real existence. However, William of Occam, within his broader critique of Thomist doctrine, denied any separate reality for ideas, which were simply abstract thoughts.

For Weaver, modern decadence stemmed directly from Occam's victory in the medieval debate. Although he accepted that he might 'be accused of simplifying the historical process', he viewed social change as the result of 'deductions from our most basic ideas of human destiny'.[22] Once Weaver had stressed the importance of the Forms at the beginning of his work, he progressed to a summary of the evils their abandonment caused. The most significant for Weaver was the gradual but steady obliteration of status distinctions. The 'history of our social disintegration began with the unfixing of relationships in the fourteenth century' but did not 'become programmatic until the nineteenth'. Knowledge and virtue should be the grounds for authority in society, but because both 'require the concept of transcendence, they are really obnoxious to those committed to material standards'. Thus, rather than the old hierarchies of function, the modern world had built a hierarchy out of 'capacities to consume'. Weaver had a Nietzschean loathing for the middle class, which he characterized as 'loving comfort, risking little, terrified by the thought of change, its aim is to establish a materialistic civilization which will banish threats to its complacency'. For Weaver, the 'rebellion against distinction is an aspect of that worldwide and centuries-long movement against knowledge whose beginning goes back to nominalism'.[23]

Besides the weakening of feudal hierarchies and the growth of a pernicious concept of equality, Weaver also blamed nominalism for the 'problems' of gender and race. On gender equality, he asserted that only a 'profound blacking out of our conception of nature and purpose could have borne this fantasy'. Besides conflicting with nature, feminism really only benefited capitalists who exploited women with low wages.[24] Weaver's writing also betrayed a racist undertone, perhaps predictably in a conservative southerner of the 1940s. 'Negro' jazz was the 'clearest of all signs of our age's deep-seated predilection for barbarism' which, in its 'contempt for our traditional society and mores', was 'a triumph of grotesque, even hysterical, emotion over propriety and reasonableness'.[25]

Despite his pessimism about the cultural decay of the modern world, Weaver accepted that there had been progress in material well-being,

suggesting that 'probably it could be shown that the average man today [...] has more things to consume than his forebears'. But this very abundance had made people less virtuous because 'the more a man has to indulge in, the less disposed he is to endure the discipline of toil'.[26] In Weaver's attitude to the Cold War he was in tune with other postwar conservatives, although he saw the middle-class values of the West as a handicap in defeating the USSR. The Cold War was a battle between 'bourgeois democracy and Soviet communism', pitting the modern Western 'ideal of happiness through comfort' against Bolsheviks constantly focused on 'dynamism' and 'expansion'. While the struggle continued, his only question was 'whether the West will allow comfort to soften it to a point at which defeat is assured or whether it will accept the rule of hardness and discover means of discipline'.[27]

He was also critical of modern universal education. America had 'built numberless high schools, lavish in equipment, only to see them, under the prevailing scheme of values, turned into social centres and institutions for improving the personality', where teachers, 'living in fear of constituents [...] dare not enforce scholarship'. Ultimately, 'popular education has failed democracy because democracy has rebelled at the thought of sacrifice'. The solution, according to Weaver, was that 'some source of authority must be found', which brings us back to Plato's Forms. The difficulties of arriving at and disseminating truth are exacerbated in a democracy, because 'superiority in knowledge carries prerogative' which contradicts the democratic bias against 'distinction and hierarchy'.[28] So, again, the problem in education was that there were no timeless, Platonic truths against which to judge better or worse, and this problem was aggravated by democracy.

This elitist, anti-democratic strand in Weaver's thought had less in common with Southern Agrarianism than New Humanism. He had written his master's thesis in 1934 on Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) and the New Humanists; but when he became a Southern Agrarian, he had criticized New Humanism for attempting to re-establish moral and critical absolutes based upon abstract reasoning alone (rather than reason combined with religious faith). Led by Babbitt and Paul Elmer More (1864–1937), the New Humanists had argued that education was more than training for a specific career, but instead had the moral goal of inculcating in students the values of civilization.[29] Babbitt had feared that democracy tempted leaders to give the people what they wanted,

encouraging a loss of restraint, and he also, like Weaver, feared that a relativistic decline in standards encouraged a mass culture of democratic vulgarity.[30] Elmer More also idolized the Greeks for their cultural achievements and believed that the role of education was to develop a classically trained aristocracy which could maintain absolute standards.[31] He also prefigured Weaver in lauding Plato as the 'supreme pragmatist, in so far as he sought to defend his belief in "Ideas" as facts more real than the objects of nature by showing that there is a spiritual intuition larger, deeper, more positive and trustworthy, more truly scientific, than the clamorous rout of physical sensations'.[32] And Babbitt had already connected Occam's nominalism with 'our [modern] type of realism'.[33] Babbitt portrayed Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as 'seeking to build up, in lieu of the crumbling traditional standards, standards more in accord with the critical spirit';[34] but it was this rationalist approach to standards (Babbitt was an atheist), rather than relying upon faith, where the Agrarians and Weaver contended that Babbitt erred.

Misusing Plato, Mislaying Aristotle?

As we have seen, the nub of Weaver's argument was the antagonism he posited between Platonic truth and modern relativism. But, Weaver maintained, modernity was not even novel in its 'denial of objective truth', which was simply a return to 'the relativism of "man is the measure of all things"',[35] the statement attributed to the sophist Protagoras.[36] The attraction of this comparison for a modern conservative is readily apparent – if modern relativism was the heart of modern liberalism, and modern relativism was no different from that of the ancient sophists, then Plato's intellectual victory over those sophists would lend authority to the arguments used by postwar conservatives against their liberal opponents.

However, Weaver's Platonism was suffused with contradictions. For example, according to Weaver, nominalism also undermined the notion of original sin. This meant that misguided moderns had to attribute man's moral defects 'to his simple ignorance',[37] rather than an innate human propensity for evil. But Weaver was arguing against a well-known Platonic viewpoint here. Plato's Socrates gave ignorance as the exact reason why people erred, contending that 'virtue is knowledge'. According to Socrates, if a man could 'distinguish good from evil, nothing will force him to act otherwise than as knowledge dictates'.[38]

Weaver's attack on equality of condition was also strange for an admirer of Plato, who had long been an object of suspicion among southern thinkers because of his supposed egalitarianism.[39] Plato's *Laws* prescribed that 'the land and houses must be divided equally (so far as possible)' and the Guardians in his *Republic* were not permitted to own property because of its corrupting influence.[40] Weaver, in contrast, described property ownership as 'the last metaphysical right' which must be protected.

Sympathy towards Aristotle might instead have been expected. Indeed earlier southern thinkers had often viewed Aristotle as an antidote to the radicalism of Plato.[41] Aristotle placed greater emphasis upon the benefits of property ownership. He maintained that 'responsibility for looking after property, if distributed over many individuals, will not lead to mutual recriminations; on the contrary, with every man busy with his own, there will be increased effort all round'. Another benefit of property ownership was that 'there is very great pleasure in helping and doing favours to friends and strangers and associates; and this happens when people have property of their own'. Aristotle did argue for a limit on the extent of private property, speaking of the ancient rule 'absolutely to prohibit the acquisition of land above a certain amount';[42] but Weaver was in agreement with this, having recommended 'the distributive ownership of small properties' as an alternative to both 'monopoly capitalism' and communism.[43] Ransom, Weaver's Southern Agrarian mentor, argued for 'business on the small scale – many owners, little businesses'.[44] It would be anachronistic to apply Aristotelian recommendations designed for the ancient Athenian economy to twentieth-century America. Nevertheless, this is what southern thinkers had been doing for decades, and Weaver was himself prepared to use Aristotle in exactly this way in later years.

Weaver's glorification of Greekness was also problematic. He contrasted supposed Greek disregard for luxury with modern, Western weakness. For Weaver, Greek civilization was 'notably deficient in creature comforts', and whereas 'the Athenians sat outdoors on stone benches to behold their tragedies; the modern New Yorker sits in an inclined plush armchair to witness some play properly described as amusement'. A Greek would wrap 'up in his cloak and lay down on a bench like a third-class rail passenger' to sleep and partake of a 'spare diet', but these were 'no obstacle to his marvellous world of

imagination'. Again, culture did not consist in 'armrests and soft beds and extravagant bathing facilities' but was 'of the imagination'.[45] These generic paeans to Greek fortitude and austerity ignore the fact that in the predominantly Athenian sources such exemplars of hardihood, like Socrates[46] or the archetypal Spartan,[47] were idealized portraits. The implication is that there existed plenty of lax and luxurious Athenians who would do well to follow their examples. Where views more likely to reflect the attitude of the 'average' Athenian have survived, in legal speeches[48] or comedy,[49] the austere lovers of asceticism tended to be targets of mockery. So Weaver's contrast between ancient hardiness and modern softness made no allowance for ancient disagreements or the purposes for which austerity was idealized in the ancient sources.

Weaver also argued that modern relativism was inimical to country living. In this respect, he echoed the Southern Agrarians, who had romanticized the rustic life and castigated industrialism.[50] For Weaver, people 'close to the soil appear to have longer memories than the urban masses' because 'traditions there live for generations'. In contrast, in cities, the 'very possibility that there may be timeless truths is a reproach to the life of laxness and indifference which modern egotism encourages'.[51] These attitudes to agriculture suggest that Weaver, through the Southern Agrarians, was drawing upon Aristotle, and this supposition is supported by discussions in later works. In a later essay on Southern Agrarianism, Weaver cited Aristotle as evidence that agrarianism was 'neither an offspring of modern romanticism nor a theory of life [...] without previous intellectual sponsors'. He quoted Aristotle directly to argue for the antiquity of the belief that there was a link between 'the life of rural husbandry and political and civic virtue'[52] and he went on to quote Aristotle's passage in the *Politics* in which Aristotle wrote that 'the best common people are the agricultural population, so that it is possible to introduce democracy as well as other forms of constitution where the multitude lives by agriculture or by pasturing cattle'. For Aristotle, owning and managing agricultural property was a 'natural' form of wealth creation in keeping with 'the good life', which acquired goods up to a limit, whereas 'unnatural' forms of wealth creation such as money-lending and trade aimed for increase 'without limit'.[53]

According to Aristotle, a democracy made up of other types of workers would be 'greatly inferior' because 'their lives are inferior, and

none of the work they do has the quality of a virtue, a mass of mechanics and market fellows and hirelings as they are'. Finally, farmers found it less easy than urban workers to attend the assembly, thus leaving politics in the hands of the elite.[54] The most secure *politeia* was one with a small property qualification, because,

> when the farming element, and the element in possession of a moderate amount of property, is the sovereign in the constitution, the constitution is operated in accordance with the laws, because so long as they work they have enough to live on; but they cannot afford to take time off, so they put the law in charge and attend only the necessary meetings of the assembly.[55]

Again, 'an agrarian people is best' because, having no 'great abundance of possessions, they are kept busy and rarely attend the assembly'.[56] A state dominated by farmers would be inherently conservative in the sense of conforming to traditional laws. Thus, Aristotle praised agriculture because of its potential to act as a restraint upon democracy. This example highlights one of the dangers of drawing modern parallels between the world of Aristotle and the twentieth century. In modern democracies the issue of taking time away from work to take part in frequent votes on matters of policy does not apply because representatives are elected to take those day-to-day votes on their electors' behalf. Nevertheless, Weaver did use Aristotle's conclusion about the superiority of farmers in other works, without detailing the reasoning behind it. Weaver also generalized on the softness of the democratic West in contrast to the communist bloc, and his laments over the decline in educational standards because of democracy remind us of Aristotle's opinion of democracies, in which 'most people prefer to live undisciplined lives, for they find that more enjoyable than restraint'.[57]

In stark contrast, Plato had much less to say on the superiority of the farmer's life. In the *Laws*, the upper strata did not actually work but had servants to do it for them.[58] The *Phaedrus* contains a list of occupations in order of their souls' contact with the Forms, in which 'managers of estates' rank third, behind philosophers and law-abiding monarchs/warriors, whereas 'farmers' rank fifth, just above sophists and demagogues.[59]

According to Weaver the most significant trait of gentlemen was their distrust of specialization, which he asserted was 'an ancient belief, going back to classical antiquity'. For Weaver, 'a man willing to bury himself in the details of some small endeavor has been considered lost to those larger considerations which must occupy the mind of the ruler'. He concluded that 'specialization develops only part of a man; a man partially developed is deformed; and one deformed is the last person to be thought of as a ruler'. He then referred to an incident in Plutarch concerning Philip and Alexander.[60] In Plutarch's account, Alexander was skilfully playing a flute when Philip taunted him for his prowess. Plutarch used the story to argue that Alexander should not have spent so long practising such a 'small endeavour' because of the 'servile nature' of the task.[61] However, Weaver ignored the servile aspect of the taunt and instead explained the story as an example of the ancient 'contempt for the degradation of specialization and pedantry'.[62]

Once again, Weaver could not use Plato in support of his attacks on specialization because the little of relevance that Plato wrote on specialization was at best ambiguous and at worst favourable towards it. Plato did suggest in the *Laws* that his citizen elite would lead lives 'devoted to the cultivation of every physical perfection and every moral virtue' for which 'the whole day and the whole night is scarcely time enough'.[63] This perhaps suggests, for the elite at least, the sort of non-specialized education favoured by Weaver. However, for the non-elite, Plato actually enforced specialization in one trade by imposing dishonour for citizens and fines or prison for foreigners who broke the rules. And the very structure of society, organized into three classes depending on their abilities and roles, put specialization at the core of his ideal state. Again, a more fitting citation might have been to Aristotle, who favoured an education which included things which were 'not useful or essential but as elevated and worthy of free men'. To be 'constantly asking "what is the use of it?" is unbecoming to those of broad vision and unworthy of free men'.[64] Education in music was necessary as one of those elevating things; however, not to the specialized extent that pupils 'acquire the degree of skill needed for professional competitions' but only so that the student became 'capable of enjoying fine melodies and rhythms'.[65]

Weaver's Antagonism to Aristotle

It is evident then that many of Weaver's ideas fitted more neatly with Aristotle's analyses than Plato's, so it is puzzling that Weaver based so much of his tract upon Plato whilst ignoring Aristotle. Further evidence only adds to the enigma. Weaver was well-versed in a southern intellectual tradition in which Plato was interpreted as a dangerous egalitarian and Aristotle was the philosopher of small-scale farming and a non-specialized gentleman ruling class. Occam, Weaver's *bête noire*, had attacked Aquinas' Aristotelianism at least as much as his Platonism. Some of the original Southern Agrarians were also, like Weaver, influenced by and in agreement with aspects of Catholic thought, and they also idealized the Middle Ages as a period of collective amity and intellectual concord. But the Southern Agrarians, although sharing Weaver's anti-industrialism, tended to look favourably upon Aquinas and his Aristotelianism. One exception, however, was Weaver's dissertation supervisor, John Crowe Ransom, who criticized both Plato and Aristotle. Ransom asserted that the apparently crumbling religious faith of Plato's time was being repeated in the twentieth century. Plato had recognized that 'religion was essential to a unified and happy state' but had not been able to commit to just one set of myths. Aristotle was censured more harshly. In Aristotle, 'a severe Western rationalism has been at work and reduced myths to metaphysics'.[66] Ransom also criticized the New Humanist Babbitt for not seeing that his 'cult of reason leads him straight into the cult of science, where he is in [. . .] the camp of the industrialists'.[67] Weaver then adopted Ransom's critique of Aristotle but rejected his (gentler) critique of Plato.

In further examining Weaver's intellectual heritage within the context of his political views in 1948, we gain some insight into the choices he made for his appropriations of Antiquity. Despite the influence of Duhamel on Weaver's engagement with Catholic thought, he rejected the models often favoured by contemporary Catholics. During the Catholic revival of the twentieth century, Aquinas was very popular, whereas Weaver avoided Aquinas, for whom he 'apparently felt an aversion'.[68] Likewise, the emphasis on Plato's Forms was not always shared by contemporary Catholics. The inimitable G.K. Chesterton even went so far as to argue that 'St Thomas, for all his love of Greek philosophy, saved us from being Platonists'. For Chesterton, pre-Aquinas medieval 'theologians had somewhat stiffened into a sort of Platonic

pride in the possession of intangible and untranslatable truths within; as if no part of their wisdom had any root anywhere in the real world'.[69] Aquinas did not completely deny the existence of transcendental Forms, like Occam, but he did believe that man could reason based upon the material world alone. Weaver, in focusing on Plato and disagreeing with Aristotle/Aquinas because of their acceptance of a partial role for materialism, was knowingly alienating a potentially sympathetic section of his readership.

The first justification Weaver gave for his rejection of Aristotle was Aristotle's apparent materialism. Even before Occam, the 'way was prepared for the criteria of comfort and mediocrity when the Middle Ages abandoned the ethic of Plato for that of Aristotle'. Aristotle's 'doctrine of rational prudence compelled him to declare in the *Politics* that the state is best ruled by the middle class'. Weaver's summary of Aristotle's philosophy here was very similar to his dismissal of the *bourgeois* mentality. For Aristotle, the truly 'virtuous life was an avoidance of extremes', even extreme virtue, which goes against the 'conception of Plato – expressed certainly, too, by Christianity – of pursuing virtue until worldly consequence becomes a matter of indifference'. Even the Catholic Church turned away from 'asceticism and the rigorous morality of the patristic fathers' under the guise of Thomism, derived from Aristotle.[70] Weaver's opposition between Aristotelian materialism and Platonic mysticism perhaps explains another distinctive feature of his work: the fact that he made no attempt to use reason to support his arguments, i.e. to show that the Forms were really real and that Occam was wrong. At least one contemporary reviewer picked up on this,[71] and the omission is the more glaring for Weaver's emphasis throughout on the power of reason in establishing the truth. It follows that perhaps one reason Weaver rejected Aristotle was because he was not mystical enough. For all Weaver's stress on critical standards, his belief in the Forms appears to have been a leap of faith, rather than a consequence of logical deduction.

In spite of Aristotle's materialism, Weaver was still able, at a later date, to credit him as an intellectual forebear for his thoughts on agriculture, which he did not do in *Ideas Have Consequences*. The question then, is why Weaver did not adopt this approach towards Aristotle in 1948, having chosen instead to call attention to those aspects of Aristotle's philosophy he disagreed with and to leave those aspects

appropriated from Aristotle uncredited. The clue may lie in Weaver's diatribes against specialization, which he associated with the march of science. Weaver argued that, after Occam, nature was no longer viewed as 'constituting an imperfect reality' but was considered to contain 'the principles of its own constitution and behaviour'. This meant that 'if physical nature is the totality and if man is of nature, it is impossible to think of him as suffering from constitutional evil'. As 'man proposed now not to go beyond the world [. . .] there followed the transition to Hobbes and Locke and the eighteenth-century rationalists, who taught that man needed only to reason correctly upon evidence from nature'. These changes led to the question of whether religion could 'endure at all in a world of rationalism and science'.[72]

In one of Weaver's few direct references to a Platonic work, he described the Aristotelian, scientific moderns as the opposite of Socrates who, in the *Phaedrus*, had 'learned not from the trees of the country but from the men of the city'. In contrast, modern specialists had 'abandoned speculative wisdom for dendrology', with the result that 'modern man is suffering from a severe fragmentation of his world picture'.[73] The 'increase in man's dominion over nature dazzled all but the most thoughtful', which led to 'a carnival of specialism, professionalism, and vocationalism, often fostered and protected by strange bureaucratic devices'.[74] These developments had been intensified by the rise of liberalism to a position of public orthodoxy in this period. He went on to argue that specialization had led to obsession over small matters and that people who are 'obsessed with small fragments can no more be reasoned with than other psychotics'.[75] Accordingly, and with Weaver forgetting Aristotle's own arguments against specialization, modern, specialized science was a consequence of the Aristotelian scientific curiosity which had been integrated within Christian thought by Aquinas. And this fusion made possible the later abandonment of the Forms by Occam. This was the fundamental issue which separated Weaver's view of Aristotle from that of the Southern Agrarians.

Part of the reason Weaver made the Southern Agrarians' anti-science viewpoint a central feature of his tract was suggested in an article he wrote over ten years later. In 'Up from Liberalism', Weaver recounted that the impetus for *Ideas Have Consequences* originated in his disillusionment with America's conduct in World War II, particularly the use of nuclear weapons to achieve it (described as America's 'demonic

technological omnipotence'). What modernity lacked was the 'bygone ideal of chivalry' which 'contained one conception that seems to be absent from all the contemporary remedies for curing war – the conception of something spiritual which stood above war itself and included the two sides in any conflict'.[76] In Weaver's framework, America's aim for the complete submission of its opponents was a direct result of the decline of a broadly educated gentleman class and the rise of specialization, which resulted in the end of chivalry.

Weaver viewed the nuclear attack on Japan as 'contrary to the canons of civilization', claiming that very few of the 70,000 people working on the project knew that their 'efforts were being directed to the slaughter of non-combatants on a scale never before contemplated' and that some might have refused to work further on it if they had known. In addition, knowledge of absolute truths might have led them to believe that 'the world is morally designed and that offenses of this kind, under whatever auspices committed, bring retribution'.[77] As examined here, part of Weaver's idealization of the Middle Ages, aside from his preference for strict social hierarchies, related to his belief in the beneficial restraining influence of chivalry. In contrast, as Weaver later argued, modern warfare had 'unlimited objectives' and 'with the weapons now available' was 'capable of consuming civilization in a holocaust'. He accepted that the ideals of chivalry were often unrealized in practice, but believed they were nevertheless more realistic than modern realism because they retained a belief that 'in war there are some considerations which must not be crowded out by hatred and fear'.[78]

In another of the handful of direct Platonic references, Weaver compared the march of science at the expense of nature with Plato's *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue Socrates met Euthyphro, a man well known for his excessive religiosity, outside the courthouse. Euthyphro was there to bring charges against his own father for impiously causing the death of a slave. Euthyphro could see no incongruity in breaking one Greek religious law (to treat one's parents with the utmost respect) in order to obey another. For Weaver, modern science was acting like Euthyphro. It had 'no right', based upon its 'partial immature knowledge, to proceed contemptuously against an ancient relationship'.[79] Aquinas had embraced Aristotelianism partly as a way of securing Christian acceptance for the inevitable development of science. But Weaver, because of his anti-materialism and his horror of modern nuclear warfare,

simply did not wish to combine Christianity with science: science had to be subservient to Christianity. It was this position that may have led Weaver to reject Aquinas in favour of an extreme Neo-Platonism. Plato stood for reason and humanity, whereas Aristotle became linked in Weaver's mind with nuclear Armageddon.

Other Conservative Appropriations of Greek Thought

Weaver was the first influential postwar conservative writer, but a small flood followed in the early 1950s. As well as Russell Kirk, who preferred Burke to Plato, there were also important works by 'New Conservatives' John Hallowell (1913–91),[80] Peter Viereck (1916–2006)[81] and Robert Nisbet (1913–96).[82] One of the most interesting figures for this study was Willmoore Kendall, who wrote a number of influential articles and helped his Yale protégé William Buckley (1925–2008) to found *National Review* in 1955.[83]

John Hallowell

John Hallowell's writings, like Weaver's, were conspicuously religious. Although Hallowell quoted Plato extensively, it was his intellectualized and politicized Christianity which stands out most clearly. Before moving on to examine Hallowell's *The Moral Foundation of Democracy*, it may be worth briefly looking at a political textbook he published earlier – *Main Currents in Modern Political Thought*.[84] It is interesting that, in a book exceeding 750 pages and written by a leading conservative intellectual, there were only 14 pages on conservatism titled 'The Conservative Reaction'. This reaction was Edmund Burke's response to the Enlightenment, and no developments in conservatism after this point were included. The work perfectly demonstrates the marginal status of American conservatism immediately after World War II. Nonetheless, conservative themes are evident, such as a reflection on 'the signs of decadence that are everywhere manifest'. Like Weaver, Hallowell saw the 'sickness of the modern world' as 'the sickness of moral confusion, intellectual anarchy, and spiritual despair'.[85]

The Moral Foundation of Democracy was Hallowell's better-known work. It begins with a discussion of Vilfredo Pareto's *The Mind and Society* (1916), in which Hallowell found that Pareto's conclusion was that all moral judgements and political debates were 'a futile exercise of

the vocal cords or a mere quibbling of the pen'. All that mattered was an individual's own interests and how to achieve his goals by using the morals of other people for his own ends. Hallowell suggested that this amoral viewpoint was made possible by the 'development of that new science of society called "sociology"'; however, he then stated that this approach was, in fact, simply a repetition of the arguments of Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*. All that Pareto had done was 'simply to restate the ancient Sophistic argument under the guise of scientific research'. Hallowell maintained that Pareto's treatise was 'an attack upon the life of reason [...] despite his apparent attachment to scientific method'. In this respect, Hallowell saw Pareto as one of a number of modern thinkers, such as Marx, Sorel and Freud, who all contended, notwithstanding their other differences, that 'men are moved more by irrational considerations than rational ones'.[86]

Hallowell, like Weaver, saw the underlying problem of the modern world as the inability of moderns to believe in moral absolutes. After discussing the work of contemporary liberal Americans, he wrote that 'unless we recover our capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood, goodness from evil, beauty from ugliness [...] there is grave danger that we, too, shall succumb to the horror that is held out to us as the promise of being made as comfortable as possible'.[87] The conservative trope that Nazi Germany was really a logical culmination of liberal relativism is evident. Hallowell blamed pluralism for the resort to force. 'If it is an illusion to believe that there is a forum of reason and conscience to which we can submit our differences for judgement, then we have no alternative but to submit them by default to force'.[88]

To support his views, Hallowell used the 'principles of classical realism', by which, as we shall see, he meant classical Greek philosophy. One principle of this classical realism was that 'there exists a meaningful reality whose existence does not depend upon our knowledge of it'. His description suggests that he favoured Aristotle's modified discussion of the Forms and matter, rather than the Platonic emphasis on the Forms alone which Weaver had adopted, for he continued that 'this principle rejects both materialism and idealism, insists that both ideas and matter are real and that one cannot be reduced to the other'. The second principle, following Plato and, perhaps, suggesting a rejection of scientific empiricism, was that 'man is endowed with a faculty which

enables him, at least dimly, to grasp the meaning of reality'. The third principle was 'that being and goodness belong together. Through knowledge of what we are, we obtain knowledge of what we ought to do'. Although he wrote that 'the contemporary revolt against reason is without precedent in terms of its universality' it was actually a repetition of the intellectual issues that 'divided the nominalists from the realists in the later Middle Ages and, even earlier, the Sophists from Plato and Aristotle'.[89] Like Weaver, Hallowell broke with the pre-war 'Old Right's' isolationism, but, as the title of the work suggested, he was more favourable towards democracy than the elitist Weaver. He accepted the need for America to combat communism abroad, although he suggested that a bigger danger for the USA than the Soviet Union was America's 'lack of a philosophy in terms of which we can justify our democracy and our preference for it'.[90]

Hallowell posited that there was 'no more vivid description of the transition from democracy to tyranny than that contained in the eighth book of Plato's *Republic*'. He absolved Plato from blame for his anti-democratic opinions by pointing out that Athens' direct democracy was very different from the representative democracy of America, which he compared to 'the form of government which Aristotle described as a polity'. Hallowell's Plato believed that social disintegration was a result of individual disintegration, which occurred when individuals revolted 'against tradition and authority, when instinct and desire are exalted above reason, when intellect is subordinated to will, when all desires become lawful and no standard is left for choosing among them'. This was essentially a summary of where Hallowell saw modernity heading. Hallowell quoted extensively from Plato's descriptions of tyranny in Book Eight,[91] and compared Plato's description of despots to Hitler. For Hallowell, Plato had provided a warning to any state which embraced materialism. Hallowell also argued that the discussion between Callicles and Socrates in the *Gorgias* represented a theme 'running throughout the history of western thought'. Socrates maintained that freedom was 'service to God and one's fellow men' and power was 'a means to promote justice and the common good', whereas Callicles represented the viewpoint that freedom was 'the power to do what one wants' and power was 'an end in itself'.[92] The implication was that Callicles' view had come to dominate modernity and conservatives were the heirs to Socrates.

According to Hallowell, the point of the *Gorgias* for modern readers was Plato's demonstration that 'freedom conceived as the unrestrained pursuit of pleasure leads to slavery'. Modern fascist and communist tyrannies differed from 'the tyrants of Plato's day only by the fact that they have greater power at their disposal'. The final lines of the book are a quote from George Thomas, which presumably Hallowell agreed with, arguing that 'the victory of Socrates over Callicles is not an academic question, it is a question of the life or death of modern civilization'.[93] Paradoxically, Plato made many more appearances in Hallowell than in Weaver, despite being much less important for Hallowell's arguments than he was for Weaver's. As we saw, Plato's theory of the Forms was the foundation of Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*. In contrast Hallowell, who was more meticulous than Weaver in providing citations, was using Plato to add a gloss to ideas which would stand (or fall) on their own merits without him. In Hallowell's case then, Plato was playing the role of a respected authority, adding plausibility to his assertions.

Peter Viereck

This role for classical Greek authors as a stamp of authority was also evident in their appropriations by other conservatives in the 1950s. In Peter Viereck's *Conservatism Revisited*, the exemplar of conservatism was Prince Metternich, the Austro-Hungarian politician influential in the creation of the post-Napoleonic European political structure. In some ways, this approach was even more quixotic than Weaver's if Viereck was hoping to influence American public opinion. It is difficult to imagine a less appealing model for proudly democratic Americans than a foreign prince widely held responsible for an international system opposed to freedom and democracy. Even Viereck accepted that Metternich often represented 'conservatism at its shoddy and reactionary worst'. Viereck's reason for choosing Metternich becomes clearer in reading his descriptions of the evils of nationalism and his hopes that the newly established NATO would conserve 'the humane and ethical values of the West'. For Viereck, Metternich's Concert of Europe and NATO had one key goal in common: 'a cosmopolitan Europe united in peace'.[94]

Like Weaver, Viereck was influenced by the pre-war 'New Humanists' and, following Babbitt, Viereck called for a return to 'humanism' and expressed revulsion against 'mass man'. Similarly to Hallowell and Weaver, Greek Antiquity represented an idealized past for Viereck. The

'Athenian classics train the complete man rather than the fragmentary man', whereas 'with his one-sided emotionalism or one-sided intellectualism, the fragmentary modernist sees life neither steadily nor whole'. Plato was mentioned, but not cited, in support of the argument that democracies turned easily into tyrannies and that both forms of government were 'arbitrary' and 'unchecked by the rights of minorities and individuals'. Viereck quoted Alfred North Whitehead to the effect that 'almost all we have of any real and lasting value has come to us from Greece'.[95] He cited Thucydides to justify the conservative's emphasis on the law, where Thucydides wrote that men seeking revenge do 'away with those general laws to which all alike can look for salvation in adversity'.[96] Again, Christianity was extolled for fusing together the 'four ancestries of western man': Judaism, Roman universalism, the 'untrammelled intellectual speculation of the Hellenic mind' and 'the Aristotelianism, Thomism and anti-nominalism of the Middle Ages'.[97] In each case, Greekness was the ideal against which modernity was judged; however, this Greekness was rhetorical, not something to be too deeply examined.

Robert Nisbet

Nisbet's *The Quest for Community* provides another example of a 1950s 'New Conservative' using Greece, though not always Plato, to lend authority. In fact, the anti-Platonic influence of Karl Popper was evident in his discussion of Plato. A footnote suggested that whilst Popper was correct in his ascription of an 'unmistakably totalitarian' design to Plato, Popper's labelling of Plato as a reactionary was 'highly questionable'. Nisbet argued that the modern growth of the state came at the expense of mediating institutions, such as churches, professions, local communities and families, which exercised their influence through 'persuasion and guidance'. As state power increased, individuals gave up real freedoms in return for promises of 'freedom from want, insecurity and minority tyranny'. Nisbet's ideal state was one that sought 'to diversify and decentralize its own administrative operations' and to support, rather than replace, existing bonds and institutions below the state level.[98] Throughout the work he tried to chart a course between the classical liberal emphasis on the individual and a socialist (and also New Deal liberal and communist) emphasis on the state.

Without providing a specific citation, Thucydides was referenced to argue that individualism appeared 'increasingly symptomatic of a fatal disease, *stasis*' and Plato's Ideas were depicted as a reaction to this individualism. He may have been partially convinced by Popper's totalitarian depiction of Plato, arguing that Plato wanted the state to be 'unified and absolute, capable of resolving both the external and internal conflicts of man'.[99] He referred to Plato's Republic as a state 'founded upon the highest principle of virtue', a half-compliment since it occurs in a discussion of the noble arguments used to justify (bad) totalitarian regimes.[100] Nisbet was in much agreement with Popper's depiction of Athens' fifth-century successes being the result of its individualism and openness, but still criticized Popper for focusing too much on individualism at the expense of those 'profoundly and deeply evocative relationships with the communal contexts of Greek religion, kinship, and the community'.[101] So Greece was still the ideal exemplar, even if Plato was not.

Nisbet also implied a disagreement with Weaver by criticizing Plato as an absolutist, again seeking a middle ground for himself. He decried not only the 'absolute scepticism' commonly attacked as a liberal vice by 1950s conservatives, but also the 'absolute certainty' which he associated with Plato and Augustine.[102] Nonetheless, Nisbet's view of Plato was a little more ambiguous than this suggests, and he did caution against 'labelling Plato an anti-individualist, for there is clearly a sense in which the *Republic* may be regarded as a profound plea for the individual – his justice, his security, and his freedom from want, uncertainty and ignorance'. But he still depicted Plato as an enemy of the 'plurality and diversity' which Nisbet favoured.[103] Nisbet quoted the *Laws*, where Plato wrote that 'no one shall possess shrines of the gods in private houses, and he who performs any sacred rites not publicly authorized, shall be informed against to the guardians of the law', which showed that Plato thought that 'spiritual faith and the state must be as one, else there will be incessant conflict between the two'.[104]

Willmoore Kendall's McCarthyite Socrates

Willmoore Kendall's engagement with Plato was more profound than Hallowell's, Viereck's or Nisbet's had been in his response to two interconnected issues in the 1950s: Karl Popper's influential depiction of

Socrates as a martyr for freedom of thought; and the rise and fall of McCarthyism as a force in American politics. Kendall was born in Oklahoma, graduated with an MA in 1928 in Romance languages, and won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford in the 1930s, where he pursued a further BA in Economics. In England, he fell under the influence of the historian and philosopher R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943) and the economist J.M. Keynes (1883–1946). Kendall's early political beliefs were communistic, and he never fully embraced the laissez-faire economics of contemporary conservative-libertarians. He worked as a Trotskyist journalist in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, but there became disillusioned with communism and began a gradual drift to the Right. He returned to America in 1940 to complete his Political Science PhD at the University of Illinois on Locke and then worked as a political science academic at Yale University from 1947 until 1961. By the early 1950s he was established as a prominent conservative intellectual.

Kendall wrote on a wide range of topics, but this section will focus on his work in support of the ancients against the moderns, in which he used the persecution of Socrates by the Athenians, and Socrates' response to this persecution, to argue in favour of contemporary American persecution of communists. This section looks in particular at 'The People Versus Socrates Revisited'[105] and 'The "Open Society" and Its Fallacies',[106] which were byproducts of Kendall's mid-life engagement with the work of Leo Strauss (see Chapter 2). Strauss had maintained, most notably in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing*,[107] that philosophers need to keep their dangerous scepticism a secret from the masses; partly to protect society from falling into chaos if people began to question traditional ideas like religion, and partly to protect philosophers from being persecuted if society defended itself against their subversive ideas. Kendall adopted Strauss's model and took it a stage further, arguing that society had the right to silence the proponents of dangerous ideas. In doing so, Kendall offered an important corrective to Popper's anachronistic portrayal of Socrates.

The Political Context: McCarthyism

Senator McCarthy had burst into the public consciousness in 1950 when he claimed to have a long list of communists working for the State Department. By this time, the initial optimism that had followed the defeat of the Axis powers had dissipated. The USSR had gone from ally

to enemy, developed its own nuclear bomb (with some assistance from Western sympathizers) and scored a series of victories in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, communist forces seemed to be taking over East Asia. The only way McCarthy could account for the relative decline in American power between 1945 and 1950, instead of recognizing that foreign nations might have been recovering from the ravages of war or that America might simply not possess the power to sculpt the entire world exactly as it might wish, was that it 'must be the product of a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man'.[108]

It is important to remember that McCarthy was never alone in holding exaggerated fears about communist infiltration and subversion of the American government, and such fears were not confined to the Right. Roosevelt had signed the Alien Registration Act of 1940, which made it a crime to advocate or help, or be associated with any organization that did so, in 'overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence'. President Truman, another Democrat, had enacted the Federal Employee Loyalty Program, which limited the rights of federal employees and further empowered the FBI to pursue and neutralize dissidents. Even a popular war hero like Eisenhower was criticized by Democrats in 1952 for saying in 1945 that the USSR had 'a desire for friendship with the United States'. Truman concurred that Eisenhower's comment had done 'a great deal of harm'. Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic nominee and popular liberal, often made the argument for civil liberties, but also stated that 'the communist conspiracy within the United States deserves the attention of every American citizen' and that 'of course' communist teachers should be fired.

Some on the Right went even further than McCarthy in their paranoia. 'Christian Crusade' was founded by Rev. Hargis in 1947 to fight the communist threat within America, using publications and a radio show broadcast on over 270 local radio stations. Hargis predicted that communists would rule America by 1974. Even after the fall of McCarthy, anti-communist groups continued to enjoy widespread support. The John Birch Society, which went so far as to accuse President Eisenhower of being a secret communist, was actually founded shortly after McCarthy's death (Russell Kirk succinctly rebutted the accusation: 'Ike's not a communist, he's a golfer'). These groups tended to be further

to the right than the 'New Conservatives', and Buckley used *National Review* to ensure that the John Birch Society was labelled extremist by the mainstream media. Nonetheless, Buckley had himself called McCarthyism 'a movement around which men of goodwill can close ranks' and later Republican Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater said in a eulogy of McCarthy in 1957 that 'because Joe McCarthy lived we are a safer, freer, more vigilant nation today'.[109] Even when McCarthyism came to be considered inexcusable in mainstream culture, fears about communist infiltration continued and the anti-communist investigations of the less well known McCarran Committee endured until 1977.

Opposition, however, began to build as McCarthy's targets became less blameworthy and his methods more extreme. Eisenhower had turned against McCarthy when he accused Eisenhower's personal friend and wartime Chief of Staff, George C. Marshall, of being a communist. But the tipping point occurred in 1954, when McCarthy accused the US army of not being vigilant against communism. Public support for McCarthy plummeted and when the Senate voted to censure McCarthy the motion passed 67 to 22, with all Democrats except for John F. Kennedy (who was in hospital, possibly as a way of avoiding the vote) voting for the motion, as well as a majority of Republicans. McCarthy's power was broken and he died in 1957.

Freedom of Speech and Thought

America's most powerful rhetorical weapon in its battle against communism was eventually turned upon McCarthy. President Truman had played up the communist threat to America in order to 'scare the hell' out of the public and thereby gain support for a more activist foreign policy. But the clarion call for the new policy abroad was the fight for freedom. Essentially, McCarthyite repression looked ever more incongruous and indefensible against the backdrop of the official narrative that 'America equals freedom.'

One surprisingly important symbol and component of that narrative was the figure of Socrates. He had been found guilty at his trial in 399 BC of 'corrupting the young' and 'not acknowledging the gods of the city'.[110] After his execution, several of Socrates' supporters wrote works defending his memory and presenting him as the virtuous, principled victim of an outrageous miscarriage of justice on the part of his city.

We have not only the two speeches by Plato and Xenophon (their *Apologies*), that purport to report his defence speech from the trial, but also Plato's dialogue the *Crito*, set in his final days in prison, in which Socrates defends his decision not to escape his execution on the basis of an imagined discussion with a personification of the laws of Athens. The *Crito* is especially important in outlining Socrates' reported feelings of obligation as a citizen of his state, because in it the laws point out that Socrates had remained in Athens, benefiting from the laws' protection, for his entire life without trying to change the laws. They argue, and Socrates agrees, that this is an implicit acceptance of the laws and, therefore, Socrates would be acting unjustly if he broke the laws merely to avoid his legally sanctioned execution.

In his re-readings of the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* and the *Crito*, Kendall took particular aim at two influential depictions of a 'liberal' Socrates, by John Stuart Mill and Karl Popper. Mill had engaged closely with Socrates in writings throughout his life, and he modelled his own political activity on Socrates' free-thinking example.[111] For Mill, Socrates was first and foremost a critic of authority and his execution was a warning against the dire consequences that followed from restrictions on freedom of expression. Popper, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, had discussed Plato and Socrates during his analysis of 'closed' and 'open' societies. The modern West had undergone 'a transition from the tribal or "closed society", with its submission to magical forces, to the "open society" which set free the critical powers of man'. However, there were still 'reactionary movements' which attempted to 'overthrow civilization and to return to tribalism'.[112] According to Popper, Plato was the leading theorist of the closed society. But although Popper was highly critical of what he labelled the 'totalitarian tendency of Plato's philosophy',[113] he shared Mill's view that Socrates was a proto-liberal. To Popper, Socrates had been a friend of the open Athenian democracy and he had spent his life trying to support it with his philosophy. The execution of Socrates, who had died 'for the freedom of critical thought', was an egregious example of what happened when the state stripped away the freedom to espouse challenging ideas. For Popper, Socrates' execution by the first 'open society' was an unfortunate accident. His accusers had only wanted to stop him teaching, and they only took that step because so many of Socrates' students had been involved in recent, bloody attempts to overthrow the democracy. Popper had Socrates explain that his decision not to escape

before his execution by hemlock was his final attempt to 'put beyond doubt my loyalty to the state, with its democratic laws'. After Socrates' death, Plato betrayed Socrates with his preference for a 'closed society', and in developing a blueprint for such a society, Plato 'was led to defend lying, political miracles, tabooistic superstition, the suppression of truth, and ultimately, brutal violence'.[114]

This image of Socrates as an icon of freedom was not confined to highbrow intellectuals. As Sara Monoson has recently shown, by the early 1950s Socrates had become 'a democratic symbol in popular discourse'.[115] In the final chapter of John Steinbeck's wartime anti-Nazi propaganda novel, *The Moon is Down*, which sold 500,000 copies in 1942, and was adapted into a popular play and film, the hero discussed the democratic courage of Socrates as a precursor to modern stands against tyranny. Monoson discusses a number of other plays, films, television and radio programmes, and popular books in the early 1950s which focused on Socrates' death in response to the Red Scare and McCarthy hearings. Socrates was a potent symbol of democracy and freedom (sometimes as an anti-communist, sometimes as an anti-McCarthyite) – including in a CBS television history programme of 1953 which used McCarthy-blacklisted Hollywood scriptwriters and had an episode on Socrates which used him to argue for free speech.[116] Such popular depictions of Socrates were well matched with the Socrates portrayed by Popper.

So Socrates was a well-known symbol for anti-McCarthyites in the 1950s. As early as 1954, in a book written by two of Kendall's Yale protégés to defend McCarthy, the tendency of liberals to use Socrates against McCarthy was already a cliché:

> The president of college A, having been invited by the president of college B to strike a blow for freedom of the mind at B's commencement exercises, can be counted on to deliver a good solid talk about Socrates and how the Athenian witch-hunters did him in for merely disagreeing with them. The modern parallel springs quickly to mind . . .[117]

As we have seen in the case of Nisbet, even some conservatives had embraced the freedom narrative. Whilst traditionalist and libertarian conservatives could agree on the need to combat communism abroad and to limit the growth of government spending at home, they still

disagreed on basic philosophical issues which expressed themselves in arguments over 'freedom'. Though Hayek had not wished to be labelled a conservative, many libertarians did gravitate to the conservative movement, and their distrust of state authority influenced their approach to Plato. Hayek himself, in the only mention of Plato in *The Road to Serfdom*, compared Plato's 'noble lies' to the 'blood and soil' propaganda of the Nazis and, even before the publication of Popper, he had referred to Plato as one of the 'theoreticians of the totalitarian system'.[118]

Frank Meyer, eventually the leading exponent of 'fusionism' (the attempt to unify the traditionalist and libertarian wings of the conservative movement) but then still firmly on the libertarian wing, had also criticized Plato's over-emphasis on the state. In an essay originally published in 1955,[119] he attacked the traditionalist conservatives as statists, whose works were filled with words like 'authority' and 'obedience', but which rarely mentioned 'freedom' or 'the individual'. Writing later, and perhaps influenced by his *National Review* colleague Kendall, Meyer argued that 'even the most casual unprejudiced reading of the *Apology* and the *Crito* – to say nothing of the *Republic* – will show that he stood not as champion of the person but of the righteous *polis* against the bad *polis*'. For Meyer, 'this inability of the Greeks to free themselves from the *polis* experienced as an organic being, of which individual men are but cells, was an omnipresent limit upon the genius of the Greeks in political-theoretical speculation'.[120] In a telling indication of his attitude to Plato, he described the society envisioned by traditionalists as 'Plato's *Republic* with the philosopher-king replaced by the squire and the vicar'.[121] Similarly, in an article of 1962 Meyer credited Plato as the founder of the political belief that freedom had to be 'subordinated to the ends designated as good by the theorist', shared by traditionalist conservatives and socialists.[122]

Consequently, Kendall was attacking a bipartisan 'open society' consensus, which had even 'infected' the conservative movement, through its proponents' use of Socrates. Conservative acceptance of Popper's analysis could be problematic for conservatism for two reasons. The straightforward reason is that Socrates held a position of high esteem as the founder of philosophy at the dawn of Western civilization. If Socrates was a proponent of absolute freedom of speech then his authority would lend respect to that position. The less obvious reason

relates to the other half of Popper's analysis: in idealizing Socrates as a symbol for freedom, he had denigrated Plato as a totalitarian. But following Weaver, Plato was the standard bearer in the conservative movement for absolute moral values versus liberal relativism. If Plato was knocked off his pedestal, the danger was that his philosophical defence of moral certainties would be toppled as well. Accordingly, Kendall's response to Popper was aimed primarily at those libertarian-leaning conservatives sympathetic to Popper's liberal analysis.

Kendall Contra Mundum

Like a large number of conservatives, Kendall had been an early supporter of McCarthy; however, whereas many eventually repudiated McCarthy, Kendall remained unapologetic even after McCarthy's fall from influence. For Kendall the fundamental battles between conservatives and their opponents were orthodoxy versus the open society; truth versus relativism; and decision making by the people's representatives, reflecting the piety of the nation, versus manipulation by unaccountable elitists. These views were not substantially altered by Kendall's encounter with the works of Leo Strauss in the early 1950s. Eventually he came to call himself a Straussian, but the influence seems to have been felt most in the techniques he used to justify his existing opinions (for example, the new focus on Antiquity in the works discussed in this chapter).

Before coming under Strauss's influence, Kendall had already been one of the most intellectually accomplished of McCarthy's defenders. Kendall was a hyper-democratic believer in majority rule, which was why he felt that individual rights could be suspended when communists disagreed with the majority. A story told by Kendall to William Buckley provides some insight into his attitude to McCarthyite populism. McCarthy was being criticized by Kendall's fellow academics during a long faculty meeting at Yale. After listening for a while, Kendall recounted a conversation he had had that morning with one of the Yale janitors:

> 'Is it true, professor, dat dere's people in New York City who want to . . . destroy the guvamint of the United States?' 'Yes, Oliver, that is true,' Willmoore had replied, 'Then why don't we lock 'em up?'[123]

Kendall then announced to his colleagues that he had 'heard more wisdom from that negro janitor' on the subject of McCarthy than from

the entire Yale faculty. As well as offering a clue as to why Kendall tended not to get along with anybody he worked alongside (including, eventually, his fellow conservatives at *National Review*), the anecdote offers an insight into his attitude towards elitism and freedom. He portrayed himself as another Socrates, willing to listen to and learn from people of all walks of life. And to Kendall, McCarthyism represented the values of the majority of ordinary, orthodox Americans, to whose commonsense opinions the government should give care.

The Straussian emphasis on the importance of intellectuals' maintenance of public orthodoxy gave Kendall another justification for his views on censorship. He adopted towards Strauss the position of 'apprehensive discipleship'[124] and referred to Strauss as his 'greatest teacher'.[125] In one letter he even addressed Strauss as his 'master' and referred to himself as an 'errant pupil'.[126] This is somewhat surprising because, when their correspondence began, Strauss was a recent, largely unknown, immigrant to America whereas Kendall was already established as an important conservative thinker. His attitude towards Strauss contrasted with his attitude towards most of the other conservative thinkers from this period. He was notoriously difficult to get along with and he seemed to enjoy belittling other conservatives, writing, for example, that his own political writings should be held to higher standards than those of 'a historian doubling in brass (like Russell Kirk); or from a young man [. . .] having his first go at these matters (like Stanton Evans); or from a popularizer (like Clinton Rossiter)'.[127] An unpublished book on conservative intellectuals included a chapter on Russell Kirk which asserted that Kirk's brand of conservatism was 'historicist' because, in declaring 'all traditions equal, it reduces the American tradition to the level of, say, the tradition that will obtain in the Soviet Union once the latter has succeeded in getting the Russian family and the Russian churches into the business of transmitting communist doctrine'. For Kendall, one of conservatism's 'basic quarrels must be the quarrel with relativism and positivism in all their forms'.[128]

Strauss himself never explicitly argued in favour of state censorship; however, Kendall seems to have believed that if the uncensored ideas of philosophers were as damaging as Strauss indicated, then censorship was a logical response. Strauss also maintained that open societies were inferior to closed societies, even when they did not lead directly to anarchy. Strauss seemed to be talking about America and referring to

Popper when he wrote of ideal societies as closed in *Natural Right and History*: 'political freedom [...] always requires the highest degree of vigilance', whereas 'an open or all-comprehensive society would consist of many societies which are on vastly different levels of political maturity, and the chances are overwhelming that the lower societies would drag down the higher ones'. Consequently, for Strauss, an open society would have to 'exist on a lower level of humanity than a closed society, which, through generations, has made a supreme effort toward human perfection'. As man could only achieve perfection by restraining his lower impulses, and as such restraint must sometimes 'be forcible restraint in order to be effective', a society that used coercion to achieve perfection was not contrary to nature.[129] Thus Strauss, besides offering an argument in support of public orthodoxy, offered no argument against using force to ensure that non-esoteric thinkers could be silenced. In the Straussian interpretation, Socrates had been 'modern' in his younger days, which had led to the largely accurate depiction of Socrates by Aristophanes in his comedy, *The Clouds*. He had later recognized the dangers of such open scepticism but by then it was too late, and so it fell to Plato and Xenophon to continue Socrates' teaching in the more 'moderate' (i.e. secret, esoteric) manner. Mill's and Popper's depiction of Socrates as a symbol of liberalism therefore went against some of the key tenets in the work of Leo Strauss.

Kendall thought that the representation of Socrates as a victim of the closed society was at the heart of Popper's argument, so he set out in 1958 to provide his own interpretation of Socrates' trial and execution. In an article in the conservative journal *Modern Age*,[130] Kendall interpreted Socrates' trial to show that the Athenians had three options: to accept Socrates' teachings and completely change their way of life (adopt a new public orthodoxy); to reject Socrates' teachings but allow him to continue teaching (allowing the two competing orthodoxies to fatally undermine the city); or to reject Socrates' teachings and silence him (reaffirm their existing orthodoxy). For Kendall, the Athenians' execution of Socrates was the second-best option (after following Socrates' teachings).[131] The essence of the argument came back to conservative criticism of liberals for their supposed moral relativism: if no beliefs were more 'right' than others, it made sense to treat all beliefs equally, but in the Straussian model, society needed to believe that its own beliefs were true in order to function (i.e. to prevent anarchy).

Hence society's orthodoxy had to be beyond question in the public sphere.

After engaging with the issue of Socrates' trial and execution, Kendall moved on, two years later, to contest Popper's arguments head-on in 'The "Open Society" and Its Fallacies'. The influence of Strauss's writings on the importance of maintaining a public orthodoxy is clear. Kendall argued that Mill's freedom of speech, on which Popper's argument depended, was the same as moral relativism:

> The basic position, in fine, is not that society must have no public truth, no orthodoxy, no preferred doctrines, because it must have freedom of speech; but that it must not have them for the same reason that it must have freedom of speech, namely: because, in any given situation, no supposed truth has any proper claim to special treatment, and this in turn because it may turn out to be incorrect – nay, *will* turn out to be at least partially incorrect, since each competing idea is at most a partial truth. Nor is that all: Mill's freedom of speech doctrine is not merely derivative from a preliminary assault upon truth itself; it is inseparable from that assault and cannot, I contend, be defended on any other ground. It is incompatible with religious, or any other, belief.[132]

Both Mill and Popper apparently gave the reader 'a series of false dilemmas: unlimited freedom of speech or all-out thought-control; the open society or the closed society'. However, 'all our knowledge of politics bids us not to fall into that trap. Nobody wants all-out thought-control or the closed society'. Following Strauss, Kendall asserted that pluralistic societies 'descend ineluctably into ever-deepening differences of opinion, into progressive breakdown of those common premises upon which alone a society can conduct its affairs by discussion, and so into the abandonment of the discussion process and the arbitrament of public questions by violence and civil war'. He cited the same example as Strauss in suggesting where pluralism inevitably led: 'the extremes of opinion will – as they did in Weimar – grow further and further apart, so that [. . .] their bearers can less and less tolerate even the thought of one another, still less one another's presence in society'.[133] For Kendall, the solution was a little early repression in support of orthodoxy before the extremes of opinion became too great.

Kendall's 1963 collection of essays, *The Conservative Affirmation in America*, contained a further essay on Popper. In it, Kendall reiterated that the question of the 'open society' was 'the crucial issue', but he also argued that it was the issue on which conservatives were 'least likely to be sure of the case for their position'.[134] On this issue, the conservative division between libertarians and traditionalists was strikingly evident. In the 1950s, even when conservatives from the libertarian wing utilized Plato to attack relativism, they still tended either to side with Popper's depiction of Plato as a totalitarian or to feel it necessary to apologize for Plato's authoritarian tendencies. Clearly, a disreputable, totalitarian Plato was a weak foundation on which to build a convincing defence of moral certainties, so it was important that both sides of the Popperian position be overturned.

Kendall claimed in the preface that the essay attacking Popper was placed, in the manner of Leo Strauss, in the centre of the book because it was the most important essay.[135] In this essay, Kendall depicted freedom of speech as a 'weapon' used by liberals like Mill and Popper to 'turn upon the traditional society' they wished to overthrow. According to Kendall, Popper had posited a false dilemma between 'unlimited freedom of speech and all-out thought-control', rather than the reality which was a spectrum of choices striking different balances between freedom and order.[136] As usual, the closest any society had come to Popper's all-out freedom was apparently Weimar Germany; a Straussian echo to remind the reader of Weimar's dark sequel.

Socrates' Trial

Kendall's approach differed from those of other critics of Popper, who tended to argue either that Plato was not an opponent of the open society or his work was irrelevant to it, or that he should be forgiven because he wrote before totalitarianism existed. Instead, Kendall argued that the real message of Socrates' trial, and Plato's presentation of it, was that the open society was itself a faulty ideal. He summarized the core of Mill's argument as a request to 'keep yourself reminded of Socrates, and what happened to him as a result of limitations imposed upon freedom of thought and speech'. The moral of Socrates' execution, in Mill's own words, was that '"there ought to exist the fullest liberty of professing and discussing, as a matter of ethical conviction, any doctrine, however

immoral it may be considered"'. Mill's interpretation seemed to Kendall to have been so widely accepted that,

> we are forever being reminded and by men who, like Mill, spend their lives opposing Plato's teaching on all other problems (and do not, by ordinary, light candles at the altars of the ancients) that there was once a man named Socrates and a court named the Assembly, that Plato set down a record of the transaction between them in order to warn all future societies of the danger and wickedness of all such interferences with freedom of expression.[137]

Kendall accepted that there was 'in the *Apology* and the *Crito* a teaching that bears directly upon the problem of freedom of thought and expression'. However, once they were correctly interpreted, 'the appeal of "open society" doctrines like Mill's and, in our own day, Karl Popper's' was radically diminished. Kendall concluded instead that the real moral was 'infinitely more complex, and points us along toward a deeper meaning, oceans apart from the teaching of Mill's *Essay*'.[138] In Kendall's presentation of the *Crito*

> the Laws do offer the citizen an opportunity to obey or convince them, and this does constitute a further point in favour of obeying them, as also a further reason for loving Athens. Which is to say: that 'amount' of freedom of speech which will enable the Laws to say, 'We do not rudely impose ourselves; rather, we give each citizen a reasonable opportunity to convince us of any alleged injustice on our part' – that amount of freedom of speech, but by no means necessarily any greater amount, is one (but only one) of the goods the good society values, as maintenance of the right of emigration is another. And ... the State that vouchsafes to its citizens that amount of freedom of speech has a better claim to obedience than it would have if it denied them that amount.[139]

He construed that the teaching of the *Crito* was that the good state allowed a certain 'amount' of freedom, but not the complete freedom demanded by Mill. It should be noted here that Mill did not quite demand absolute freedom. His essay gave the 'one very simple principle' that liberty could be curtailed to 'prevent harm to others'.[140] No doubt

Kendall would have disagreed with Mill about their definitions of 'harm', but their underlying principles were not as far apart as Kendall suggested. For Kendall, dissidents harmed the fabric of society if they continued uninterrupted. For him, the implication of the *Crito* was therefore that they should be allowed to criticize the state for a period, but not 'indefinitely and with impunity, no matter how deeply convinced their neighbors may be that they ought to be silenced, or punished'. To tolerate but disagree with Socrates would be to renounce their responsibilities, because it would run the risk that Socrates' students would eventually embark on a revolution and because Socrates would 'not let the Athenians merely tolerate him' but would 'seize upon his toleration as a lever for bringing about his revolution'.[141]

Kendall was again really referring to communists in America. 'The Athenians are running a society, which is the embodiment of a way of life, which in turn is the embodiment of the goods they cherish and the beliefs to which they stand committed'. To ask a society to tolerate a potential threat to this existence 'is to demand that they shall deliberately do that which they can only regard as irresponsible and immoral – something, moreover, that they will seriously consider doing only to the extent that their society has ceased, or is about to cease, to be a society'.[142] Thus, the state had the right to strike back at dissidents if it found their ideas dangerous. He then explicitly compared this good state to contemporary America's dealings with communists. This good state was one 'like our own when it takes action against the communists', letting its citizens know that they could 'embrace and communicate certain doctrines only at their own very considerable risk'.[143] When Kendall wrote that the Athenians had to refuse to tolerate Socrates, he was arguing that Americans should refuse to tolerate communists. Athens could not tolerate Socrates (and America could not tolerate communists),

> because the very question at issue, whether their way of life is worth preserving, is for them a closed question, and became a closed question the moment the Athenians became a society ... For them to let Socrates go on talking, given his ability to fascinate youngsters who know no better than to be convinced by him, is to court that danger, and that is no less irresponsible and immoral than to 'carry out Socrates' revolution themselves.[144]

Kendall did not assert that the Athenians' existing way of life was superior to the one Socrates recommended, though he did describe Socrates' way of life as an unrealistic possibility. Hence, Kendall was not necessarily arguing that America's existing system was superior to communism, though no doubt many readers assumed that for themselves. Using Kendall's logic, any society was within its rights to silence anybody who refused to stop recommending that the society be changed. This does not really seem at all different from the relativistic conservatism that Kendall castigated Kirk for. Athens could not tolerate Socrates and America could not tolerate communists because to do so would have been to irresponsibly risk the end of Athens and America as societies.

With hindsight, we may say that America was not seriously threatened by an internal communist threat. According to Eric Foner, the 'tiny Communist Party hardly posed a threat to American security and many of the victims of the Red Scare had little or nothing to do with communism'.[145] In fact, Mill's liberal argument for freedom of speech, that allowing the free expression of ideas allows the good ones to defeat the bad ones, may look to have been vindicated. However, for many in the 1950s the threat seemed real and the USSR seemed like a viable alternative.

The Consequences of these Ideas

The works considered in this chapter had little mainstream appeal when they were first published. As a stronger conservative movement developed from the 1960s onwards and staked a claim to this particular intellectual heritage, these works grew in importance and began to form an important 'canon'. At the same time, the strengthening of the conservative movement eroded the appeal of some of the quirkier conservative texts from the earlier period. For example, Weaver's assortment of controversial ideas, including his anti-capitalism and abhorrence of nuclear weapons, could be taken seriously by conservatives as long as conservatism remained a marginal movement, open to a fairly wide spectrum of ideas and political positions. As the movement became better organized, gaining adherents and institutional support, Weaver's anti-middle class, anti-nuclear and anti-free market sentiments had to be downplayed. What remained was his central emphasis on immortal Platonic truths.

A contributory factor in Weaver's positive reception in conservative circles was his background as a southerner. The South in the 1950s was still largely a Democrat stronghold despite the South's social conservatism and firm opposition to federal civil rights legislation. The dilemma for northern conservatives was that they wanted to support the issue of states' rights but did not want to be associated with the racist aspect of southern states' rights rhetoric.[146] It was hoped that an alliance with southern intellectuals like Weaver would help northern conservatives to entice southern conservatives away from the Democratic Party, and so Weaver became *National Review*'s 'leading spokesman for the conservative virtues of the "southern tradition"'.[147] In 1957 Weaver referred to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education in Topeka*, which declared that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional, as an example of 'political fanaticism' and tantamount to 'communization'.[148] Buckley himself wrote an editorial in which 'the magazine came out bluntly against democracy and for white supremacy'; however, though 'Buckley's position was probably well received by many of his southern readers, it threatened to push NR's politics beyond the boundaries of credible politics' for northern readers. In the next issue, staff writer L. Brent Bozell sharply disagreed with Buckley's stance, 'emphasizing NR's full-throated support of massive resistance' to federal intervention, but drawing 'the line at political disenfranchisement'.[149]

Weaver was an important early contributor to *National Review* and influential with some of the other key figures. The fundamental themes of the conservative group Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), founded in 1960, were heavily influenced by Weaver's Platonic absolutism. The founding manifesto of YAF, which affirmed belief in 'certain eternal truths' and 'transcendent values', came directly from Weaver's interpretation of Plato.[150] Weaver sat on YAF's original 'National Advisory Board' of prominent conservatives and was given an award in recognition of his influence on the conservative movement by YAF in 1962. The 'unapologetic philosophical absolutism of the crusading conservatives of the early 1960s owed much to the worldview and rhetorical tone of *Ideas Have Consequences*'.[151]

The editors of *National Review* sought to form a coalition between the three main tendencies in the fledgling movement; however, the blending of traditionalists with libertarians was not always smooth, even where more diplomatic individuals than Kendall were involved. As we

have seen, Weaver had initially viewed free market liberalism as another symptom of modern decay; nonetheless, the two sides reached an accommodation through their shared antipathy to socialism and their support for private property rights. In the long run, Weaver's hostility towards the middle class and the free market did not resonate with the Right, but his paeans to private property did help 'conservatives to vindicate private property rights in language that did not look like a vindication of materialistic acquisitiveness'.[152] Weaver even seemed to mellow with age and by 1961 he was sufficiently reconciled with free enterprise that he became a founding sponsor of a classical liberal journal, the *New Individualist Review*, alongside free-market economists Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman.

Conservative uses of Plato in this period become more interesting in light of contemporary debates over the culpability of both Plato and conservatism in the horrors of Nazism. Conservative groups in America were themselves often suspected of Nazi or fascist sympathies (this charge had been laid against the Southern Agrarians in the 1930s, and some of the prominent spokesmen for the 'America First' movement to keep America out of World War II had Nazi sympathies). In making modernity itself the enemy of Plato and conservatism, they were in effect arguing that Nazism was the culmination of modernity, not its antithesis, and therefore another symptom of modern, liberal, spiritual decay.

Ultimately, Weaver's engagement with classical thought was a good example of the dynamic tension at the heart of any appropriation of the classical tradition. The political context was ripe for a conservative resurgence and at the same time Weaver's pessimistic analysis of Western decline tapped into conservative concerns over their apparent political impotence. Weaver's religious adoption of Plato's Forms, without Babbitt's critical reasoning, and his rejection of Aristotle, represented a fusion between the Platonism of the New Humanists, the anti-industrialism of the Southern Agrarians and the religiosity of the Catholic revival. Though much of Weaver's work shows appropriations from the 'Southern' Aristotle, the latter's association with scientific curiosity forced Weaver to reject him, and Aquinas, as foundational sources. However, the tradition is not an infinitely malleable tool to be bent and subverted at will; it also imposes its own demands on its users. Plato's borrowed authority boosted the seriousness of Weaver's work, but

inconsistencies between the Platonic, and wider Greek, ideas and Weaver's work cannot be papered over. In the end, the Platonic evasions and the silent debts to Aristotle help us to interpret and appreciate Weaver's work, but they also highlight its limitations.

Plato tended to be less central to the thought of many other conservatives in this period. Thinkers such as Nisbet and Hallowell used Plato as an authority figure who could add a coating of respectability to their ideas. At the same time, the attacks of Popper had taken away some of Plato's sheen in the immediate postwar period, so they had to be careful how they used him. Kendall was exceptional in his sustained engagement with Plato to confront Popper. In the long term, Kendall has not been as well remembered as other 'founding fathers of American conservatism' like Buckley and Kirk and he did not share Weaver's contemporary resonance, which must in part have been due to his dedication to an already vanquished cause: McCarthyism had lost the public battle before Kendall published his first article in its defence. Another factor was his tendency to critique and belittle his fellow conservative intellectuals. Nash has suggested that three additional causes contributed to this neglect: he died relatively young; he tended to write essays rather than books; and his continued tendency to develop his ideology, even into middle age (such as his conversion to Straussianism), slowed down his output.[153]

Kendall's Socratic critique of Mill and Popper was aimed at liberals, but we need to be clear that the liberals in question were by then merging with the conservative movement. Conservatism in the 1950s and 1960s was not a monolithic ideology but an amalgamation of different worldviews and traditions. During this period these different groups on the Right were beginning to contest and formulate combined positions on key issues, and one such issue was the level of freedom that should be allowed to left-wing critics of America. Buckley, the founder of *National Review*, had combined a strong attachment to free market principles in the economy with traditionalist, Christian perspectives in other areas. His provocative and controversial *God and Man at Yale*[154] was an attack on Yale's faculty for not inculcating both free market principles and Christianity. But others did not combine an attachment to the free market and traditionalism so effortlessly. Some, like Weaver, Kirk and Kendall, came down on the traditionalist side and at times attacked libertarians' exaltation of freedom, whereas classical liberals like

Hayek and Meyer posited freedom as the highest good and looked upon the traditionalists as reactionaries.

Accordingly, Kendall, in spite of his idiosyncrasies, needs to be read in the context of these intra-conservative debates. He is usually remembered today by traditionalist conservative thinkers; but perhaps his key significance was that he foreshadowed the neoconservatives of the next generation. His intellectual journey – youthful Trotskyist who moved rightwards and became an acolyte of Leo Strauss in his maturity – mirrored that of the influential neoconservative Irving Kristol two decades later (see Chapter Three). Kendall also favoured a politically engaged, populist Christianity, and this combination of elitist intellectualism and religious populism was the key innovation of the neoconservative movement and has been integral to the Republicans' electoral success since the early 1980s.

Kendall's critique of the then-dominant liberal interpretation of Socrates' trial made some sound points. Nowhere in the *Apology* or the *Crito* did Plato argue that freedom of speech should be a human right or that its absence in Athens was lamentable. It might be argued that the pathos of Socrates' execution leads the reader to such a conclusion implicitly, but this would ignore another possibility – that our dismay might derive from our belief that Socrates was right. The jury made a mistake because Socrates spoke the truth, and was not therefore guilty of corrupting anybody; but if he had been a corruptive influence, there was no indication in these dialogues that he should still have been spared. Likewise Popper's 'rights'-based interpretation was anachronistic. Fundamental human rights as understood today developed from the natural rights thinking of the Middle Ages, and there is no evidence that the ancient Greeks conceived of justice in this way.[155] Furthermore, Popper's emphasis on Socrates' loyalty to Athens and its 'democratic laws' implies that it was the democratic aspect of the laws that especially demanded Socrates' loyalty, and that therefore he was a full-hearted supporter of democracy. This perspective is again at odds with the picture painted in the sources (though Popper would no doubt blame the anti-democratic bias of Plato for distorting the 'real' Socrates), in which, for example, democracy was compared to letting the least qualified navigate a ship at sea.[156] It is interesting that Kendall's interpretation of the trial, coming from the Right, reached a similar conclusion with regards to Socrates as that later reached by I.F. Stone in *The Trial of Socrates*, coming

from the political Left. For Stone too, 'Socrates would have found it repugnant to plead a principle [freedom of speech] in which he did not believe'.[157] And in both cases, the Athenian *demos* were partially justified in turning on Socrates.

But there were flaws too in Kendall's interpretation of Socrates' example as a justification for contemporary McCarthyism. Although Popper may have romanticized Socrates in demarcating him so radically from Plato, Kendall went too far in the opposite direction. He accepted without question Plato's description of the facts. For Kendall, what Socrates said in the dialogues was what the historical Socrates said too, ignoring Plato's role as the author and interpreter of the events he described. A second problem is that, even if Kendall was correct in writing that the dialogues made no explicit arguments for absolute freedom of speech, this does not mean that we must reach the same verdict as Plato. It is quite possible to come to the conclusion that freedom of speech is a good thing, and would have saved Socrates, and still accept that Plato (and possibly even Socrates) reached a different conclusion. Kendall also went too far in his attempts to justify the execution. Socrates (or Plato) did say that it was better to obey even unjust laws, but that in itself means that he/they thought the verdict was wrong. Essentially, the *Crito* says that you should, under certain circumstances, follow even unjust laws, not that the laws should be unjust – it says nothing about how laws on freedom of speech should really be. Even if we accept Kendall's argument that Plato justified Athens' silencing of societal critics, that does not then justify America doing the same thing. The foundation of Kendall's argument was that societies must have unquestionable ideals or they would crumble into anarchy. America's continued survival after repudiating McCarthy seems to be a continuing rebuttal to that claim.

Finally, the examples of Kendall and Popper highlight tensions within our concept of 'authenticity'. Kendall's Socrates was truer to the surviving sources and a more accurate portrayal if judged on that criterion. But since we do not really know how accurate the sources themselves are, perhaps this aspect should not necessarily be privileged over other approaches? Kendall's historiographical approach may well be distorted by the sources as Popper believed. Popper's approach, refashioning the bare facts to create a conversation with, and critique of, Plato may be more philosophical and more authentic if we allow him to draw conclusions not found within the sources.

The analyses of Western decline and attacks on modernity considered in this chapter struck a chord with contemporary conservatives, but these works are often not as philosophically rigorous as those of the slightly later Straussian works dealing with similar themes. In Weaver's case, the appeals to a generic Greekness, which was never defined, the lack of any effort to justify either the truth of the Forms or the analysis of Western decline, and the focus on Plato, despite numerous instances of unresolved conflict between his and Weaver's ideas, make it difficult to view the work as a serious piece of philosophy. Nonetheless, Weaver was the first conservative to adopt anti-relativist discourse to overtly political, rather than cultural, ends. During the conservative intellectual and organizational renaissance of the 1950s a small number of Jewish émigrés, who had fled Nazi persecution in Europe, were also beginning to make their names within the conservative movement. Two of these thinkers' appropriations of Greek ideas will be examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

LEO STRAUSS AND THE ANCIENTS AGAINST THE MODERNS

> Pearly White: Moral virtue has no application to the really intelligent man, the philosopher. In the words of Leo Strauss: 'Moral virtue only exists in popular opinion where it serves the purpose of controlling the unintelligent majority.'[1]

During the controversy surrounding the Iraq War of 2003, a number of the war's critics asserted that the ideas of political philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973), mediated through his disciples in Washington, were responsible for suborning US foreign policy. In the quotation above, from Tim Robbins' anti-Iraq War play *Embedded*, a group of thinly disguised 'neocons' in the Pentagon, calling themselves 'philosopher kings', plot the Iraq War and the exploitation of public opinion using the deceit and amorality they have learned from Leo Strauss (though Strauss never actually wrote the quote attributed to him by Robbins). The influence of Strauss and the Straussians is much disputed, but the accusations of a Straussian conspiracy were not confined to anti-war 'satires' like *Embedded*. Even during the 1990s, *Time* magazine had described Strauss as 'perhaps one of the most influential men in American politics'. This view became more widespread in the build-up to the 2003 invasion. According to the *Boston Globe*, the world of 2003 was one 'increasingly shaped by Leo Strauss'. He was 'a disguised Machiavelli, a cynical teacher who encouraged his followers to believe

that their intellectual superiority entitles them to rule over the bulk of humanity by means of duplicity'.[2] In this popular view, Strauss was a puppet master, pulling the strings of American presidents from beyond the grave. Academic historians, such as Donald T. Critchlow, have agreed that he was influential, arguing that he 'served as an intellectual godfather' to the neoconservatives.[3] However, according to one modern neoconservative, although 'Strauss's views inspired some early neocons, few read him today, contrary to all the articles asserting that . . . Strauss is the neocons' "mentor"'.[4]

This chapter does not directly assess the significance of Strauss's ideas for the later conservative movement, though later chapters will examine how his ideas were adopted by some neoconservatives and how Straussian themes contributed to and sometimes contradicted later conservative appropriations of Greek thought in evolving stances on social policy, education and foreign policy. Rather, the aim here is to examine how he used and appropriated ancient thought to challenge modernity, and how his ideas connected with the concerns of his contemporaries, particularly those of Eric Voegelin (1901–85).

I begin with a discussion of Strauss's theory of esotericism, the key to understanding his ideas. Next, I explore how Strauss appropriated Greek thought within three related themes which ran through his work and interacted with similar concerns in the 1950s and 1960s conservative movement; the 'politico-theological problem', his critique of moral relativism and his use of Greek thought to highlight apparent flaws in liberal democracy. What Strauss called the 'politico-theological problem' was the seeming incompatibility between philosophy and religion. Strauss argued that philosophers must respect religion (i.e. not publicly undermine it) because it helped to maintain social peace and unity. This religious aspect, whilst creating apparent problems between religious conservatives and Straussians (because the latter held that religion was good because it was socially useful, rather than because it was true), paradoxically laid the foundations for the strong relationship between neoconservatives and the Religious Right in later decades. Strauss also criticized modernity's supposed moral relativism, particularly as he saw it manifested in contemporary social science, a critique which meshed closely with the concerns of contemporary thinkers like Weaver. Finally, Strauss used Greek thought in his critique of liberal democracy and his pessimism about democracy's

ability to resist totalitarianism. Nonetheless, despite his pessimism, he thought that 'reading old books is today indispensable as an antidote to the ruling dogma', and thereby a way to think through society's fundamental problems.[5]

On all three themes alternative interpretations of Strauss's real meaning have been offered. Where some see Strauss as a defender of natural law, others see him as secretly teaching that in a lawless world the strong should exploit the weak; where Straussians argue that Strauss criticized democracy in order to strengthen and defend it, others see an anti-democratic ideologue who maintained that an amoral elite should control America through deception; and where supporters see a thoughtful examination of the unbridgeable tensions between reason (philosophy) and religion, critics see Strauss as a Nietzschean enemy of religion who encouraged his supporters to exploit the superstitious gullibility of the masses to attain power. To illuminate Strauss's approach to ancient texts, I have included a case study examining Strauss's interpretation of one particular ancient work, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. This commentary has often been neglected by Strauss scholars but, as I will argue, it sheds particular light on those of Strauss's followers who turned to politics. This chapter will argue that Strauss was neither the champion of democratic freedom described by his supporters, nor the closet Machiavellian portrayed by his critics, but something more interesting between these poles.

Leo Strauss

Strauss was born in Germany and raised in an Orthodox Jewish household, where he also received the classical education then common in Germany. He received his doctorate from Hamburg University in 1921, and spent a post-doctoral year at Freiburg, where he was much influenced by Heidegger, before working for the Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin. In 1932 he left Germany, first for France and then on to England in 1933, before settling in America in 1937, working at the New School in New York and then joining the University of Chicago in 1949 as a professor of philosophy. He retired from full-time teaching in 1968 but continued writing until his death. The work which brought Strauss to the attention of conservatives was *Natural Right and History*,[6] in which he took post-Renaissance thinkers

to task for what he saw as their dogmatic rejection of the possibility of ancient natural right. As will become evident, Strauss's often enigmatic commentary in individual works can only be understood within the context of his complete oeuvre. Consequently, this chapter touches upon a range of his works. Besides *Natural Right and History*, the focus will be upon *Persecution and the Art of Writing*,[7] in which he outlined his theory of esoteric writing, and *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus*,[8] which I will argue is crucial for grasping the Straussians' understanding of philosophy's relationship to politics.

Secret Teachings

The first obstacle encountered when approaching Strauss is the difficulty of establishing what it was that he actually meant. Partly, this problem is the result of his dense writing style and methodological approach, which often involved line by line analyses of other writers (making it difficult to draw a distinction between the views of Strauss and those of the works under discussion). Partly the danger is that shared by any political writer – political allies tend to absolve them of unpalatable views whilst opponents interpret the darkest of meanings from anything with a hint of ambiguity. But the greatest difficulty emerges from one of Strauss's clearest and least ambiguous positions: the idea that thinkers of the past wrote esoterically. He was not the first writer to suggest this; and Nietzsche, whom Strauss cited as a major influence, had written of the 'exoteric and the esoteric, as they were formerly distinguished by philosophers – among the Indians as among the Greeks, Persians and Mussulmans; in short, wherever people believed in gradations of rank and not in equality and equal rights'.[9] In this view, premodern philosophers hid their true views from the masses so that the real meaning in their works could be deciphered only by a select few. But a suspicion inevitably swells – if Strauss believed that previous writers did this, perhaps he himself wrote esoterically? As a German Jew, he was no stranger to persecution, and his writings were certainly not 'easy reads'; so how can we be sure that his exoteric opinions were really his 'true' views? With this possibility in mind, Strauss's interpretations of Greek thought take on greater importance. This is partly because so many of his works were commentaries on ancient Greek works. Additionally, as Shadia Drury has argued, Strauss 'undoubtedly regarded classical thought as the repository of human wisdom and truth [. . .] and he used

"classic natural right" as the standard by which to criticize modernity'.[10] Consequently, these commentaries, if read correctly, might offer the key to unlocking his 'real' thought.

Strauss elaborated his theory of esotericism in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, but the title itself suggested only half the reason that thinkers wrote esoterically. Fear of persecution was one reason to be cautious in expressing opinions, but Strauss made clear that the damage philosophy could do to society was just as important, arguing that 'there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people'. Accordingly, persecution of incautious philosophers by society was natural, since once damaged it would 'be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths'.[11] The work itself was structured as a group of commentaries on Jewish and Islamic works from the Middle Ages, but its usefulness for our present purpose is that in it Strauss first set out his theory of esotericism and his technique for reading esoteric texts which he later applied to classical works.

Strauss explained that his Islamic and Jewish writers were part of an esoteric tradition going back to Antiquity and then referred to various sections from Platonic writings in support.[12] However, Strauss did not explain how these Platonic texts supported his view and a closer look at them raises concerns. The section cited from the *Republic* does not mention esotericism, the section from the *Phaedo* merely observes that philosophers are unpopular, and the *Timaeus* simply indicates that writing the truth about reality 'to all men would be a task impossible' (but without indicating why). Plato's *Seventh Letter* was the most supportive of Strauss's argument, but it is questionable whether the letter was really written by Plato or was instead an ancient forgery (although even an ancient forgery would support Strauss's argument that the concept of esoteric writing was recognized in Antiquity). In a slightly later work, Strauss left open the possibility of modern esotericism, arguing that 'in a considerable number of countries which, for about a hundred years, have enjoyed a practically complete freedom of public discussion, that freedom is now suppressed and replaced by a compulsion to coordinate speech with such views as the government believes to be expedient, or holds in all seriousness'.[13] He did not specify these countries, but the obvious assumption is that he was describing Russia and Eastern Europe under communist rule; however, few of them

had completely free media in the first place, so could it be that he was also talking of the West?

A key section in *Natural Right and History* described how Strauss believed modern writers would act when in fear of persecution. According to Strauss, it was perfectly possible for dissenters to speak or even publish their heresies, providing they moved 'with circumspection'. Strauss used a hypothetical historian in a totalitarian country who had come to doubt that country's official 'history of religion'. He could not express that doubt openly, but would be allowed to publish an attack on the liberal history of religion. In order to do this he would have to describe the liberal view, and he would do so in a 'quiet, unspectacular and somewhat boring manner which would seem to be but natural; he would use many technical terms, give many quotations and attach undue importance to insignificant details; he would seem to forget the holy war of mankind in the petty squabbles of pedants'.[14] As Drury has observed, perhaps a little harshly, 'a better description of Strauss's work could not be found'.[15] Strauss's own disciple Allan Bloom wrote that Strauss was capable of writing much more eloquently than he usually did,[16] which supports the reader's inkling that his boring style was intentional and the purpose was to shroud his true meaning. In *Natural Right and History*, only when Strauss's hypothetical dissenter,

> reached the core of his argument would he write three or four sentences in that terse and lively style which is apt to arrest the attention of young men who love to think. That central passage would state the case of his adversaries more clearly, compellingly and mercilessly than it had ever been stated in the heyday of liberalism, for he would silently drop all the foolish excrescences of the liberal creed which were allowed to grow up during the time when liberalism had succeeded.[17]

So most of a modern esoteric book would be a dull repetition of conventional dogma, but that central section would seize the attention of the 'intelligent young man'. This reader would then read the book again more closely and begin to see patterns 'in the very arrangement of the quotations from the authoritative books' which would expand upon that short, exciting section.

Strauss went on to lay out his rules for deciphering esoteric texts. Readers needed to fully understand the context of any statement, they should always be alert for irony, any obvious errors or inconsistencies should be assumed to be intentional, and the views of attractive characters should not be assumed to be shared by the author.[18] These arguments for a close analysis of source texts look like common sense, but in giving extra significance to what was written in the middle of books and in unearthing supposedly hidden significance in the numbering of chapters and paragraphs[19] the methodology becomes suspect. And the close attention to numbers in his work does not always lead anywhere obvious. For example, in a commentary on Xenophon's *Anabasis*, Strauss pointed out that an Armenian village chief's daughter was married nine days earlier, that nine is the central number between zero and seventeen, which was the number of horses the villagers had bred for the king (and were instead given to the Greeks) and also the number of times Xenophon mentioned the gods in his first three speeches.[20] But why Xenophon provided this apparent repetition of nine was not explained.

Strauss published 'On a Forgotten Kind of Writing' in response to criticism received for *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. In it he expanded on the view that the primary reason to write esoterically was to protect society from the damage that truth would do to those unable to cope with it (i.e. non-philosophers). Philosophy was,

> the attempt to replace opinion about 'all things' by knowledge of 'all things'; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society. Hence philosophy or science must remain the preserve of a small minority.[21]

Therefore, philosophers have often disguised esoteric philosophical writings beneath a conventional, and socially useful, disguise. Whereas the exoteric message is accessible to all, esoteric teachings are only comprehensible to a small group of intelligent and well-trained readers.

Drury has maintained that Strauss was an esoteric writer, but that Straussian method does not reveal his hidden meaning. She has instead contended that he hid his meaning behind 'a veil of scholarship or dispersed in the course of detailed and sometimes tedious

commentaries', by the use of ambiguity of meaning, and through the 'dual use of key words like virtue, justice, nobility and gentlemanliness'.[22] Drury has been one of Strauss's harshest critics, but some of Strauss's own followers have admitted some level of esotericism in his writings. The Straussian Christopher Bruell has written of Strauss's work that 'the same remark can mean one thing to someone who merely "takes it in" but quite another to one who, following the implicit argument on his own, puts to it at each stage the correct questions'. Consequently, only 'to the right kind of reader Strauss presents in these books, as in no other books of his, also himself . . . as he truly was'.[23] Kendall too thought that 'it would be too much to expect so skilful a decipherer of ciphers as Professor Strauss to write a book without including a little secret writing of his own'.[24] It follows that whether we accept Drury's contention that Strauss's writings contained a hidden message completely at odds with his public message, or his followers' views that they comprised more subtle hidden views that expanded upon his public message, we need to be alive to the possibility of well-hidden aspects when reading Strauss's work.

Religion – the Politico-Theological Problem

One of Strauss's major themes was the incompatibility between philosophy and religion. According to Drury, 'for Strauss, the ills of modernity have their source in the foolish belief that there are no harmful truths, and that belief in God and rewards and punishments is not necessary for political order'. Strauss believed that religion was nonsense but still a 'necessary fiction'. Drury cited Strauss's religious commentaries ('Interpretation of Genesis' and 'Jerusalem and Athens') in which Strauss suggested that the Bible itself prohibited philosophy. Drury suggested that Strauss's respect for religion essentially meant lying about it to take advantage of the devout.[25] It was this interpretation that entered the mainstream media during the controversies over Straussians in the Bush administration during the Iraq War period.[26]

There is a kernel of truth at the heart of Drury's caricature. What Strauss called the 'Politico-Theological problem' was the tension at the heart of his philosophy and it ran through his writings from his first book published in 1930. In this work, he contrasted the attitude to religion of the Jewish Enlightenment thinker Baruch Spinoza with the

attitudes of medieval thinkers such as Moses Maimonides. On the face of it, their views were in sharp contrast. Spinoza was critical of religious belief, whilst Maimonides seemed to believe that there was no inherent conflict between reason and religion.[27] However, according to Strauss, 'the harmony between reason and revelation was Maimonides' [. . .] public teaching, while the private teaching was that there is a radical and irreducible tension between them'.[28] Accordingly, Maimonides and Spinoza were equally rational and atheistic – the difference was that Spinoza no longer believed that philosophy was the preserve of the elite, which meant that he could be open about his true beliefs. For Spinoza, philosophy could be utilized by everybody for the improvement of society. Maimonides did not want to undermine the religious beliefs of his community, whereas Spinoza did, and Spinoza's view was 'the essence of modernity'. Strauss's preference for premodernity would suggest that he, like Maimonides, was an atheist whose respect for religion simply meant not attacking it publicly.

An understanding of Strauss's attitude to religion helps to decipher his commentaries on classical authors. For example, according to Strauss, Socrates proved that 'piety is good' in the *Oeconomicus*;[29] but the suspicion grows that by piety Strauss really meant the appearance of piety for the sake of bolstering the spirits of the non-philosophers (in this case the interlocutor Kritoboulos). In *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, published after his death, Strauss described Xenophon as very pious, which is unremarkable given his regular sacrifices and prayers in the *Anabasis;* but Strauss qualified that by adding that his piety 'surely differs *toto coelo* from the piety of a Nikias'[30] – again suggesting perhaps that Strauss's Xenophon gave the appearance of piety without truly believing (in his case, to impress and encourage the Greek army). In contrast, Nikias' strong and genuine piety sometimes conflicted with the needs of practical necessity, contributing to his eventual defeat and death. In one of Strauss's earlier and lesser known works, his Xenophon and Socrates were not at all pious. In 'The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon', he argued that 'Socrates did not believe in the gods of the city, nor did his pupil Xenophon. But both master and pupil took every imaginable care to hide from the public their unbelief'.[31]

In this recognition of the apparent incompatibility between reason and revelation, Straussianism has an uncomfortable fit with religious conservatism. We find the beginnings of this tension in Hallowell's

review of *Natural Right and History*. In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss had traced the origins of natural right to the attempt by non-believers to find rational, non-religious grounds for morality.[32] Modern thinkers had abandoned natural rights but Strauss contended that a return to Antiquity could solve the modern 'crisis'. Hallowell, a traditionalist conservative and devout Christian, was happy to appropriate Plato himself, as we saw in Chapter 1. But for Hallowell, Strauss went too far in critiquing modernity purely because of its disconnect from Greek thought. He praised Strauss for his 'brilliant analysis of the meaning and limitations of the methodology of Max Weber' but disagreed with the source of the problem being a conflict between ancient and modern. His criticism arose because Strauss approached 'the problem of natural right from the perspective of classical paganism; he interprets the modern revolt against the tradition of natural right, not primarily as a revolt against the Christian tradition, but as a revolt against the classical tradition'. Hallowell believed instead that 'Aquinas went a long way towards achieving the harmony between reason and revelation that Professor Strauss would deny is possible'. To Hallowell, 'St. Paul had a more profound understanding of man's predicament and need than did Aristotle. Which is not to deny the wisdom of the Greeks but only to say that it is insufficient'.[33] So Strauss's more astute reviewers perceived that his beliefs made an uncomfortable fit with religious conservatism.

Nevertheless, Strauss was careful to leave open the possibility of religious truth. In *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, he argued that reason could disprove religion's claim to 'know', but it could not disprove belief in the 'irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God whose will is unfathomable, whose ways are not our ways, who has decided to dwell in the thick darkness, may exist'.[34] Hence, although Strauss had chosen reason, which meant he rejected revelation (since he believed the two paths were mutually exclusive), there was no inherent criticism of revelation in this choice because both choices were acts of will. And if natural right existed, then both reason and religion could lead to similar outcomes in terms of a morally absolute view of reality. But this raises the question of what Strauss really meant by natural right.

Moral Relativism versus Natural Right

We saw in Chapter 1 that a key issue for Weaver was the defence of absolute moral standards against what he saw as the relativism which

characterized modernity. This issue was raised again and again in conservative works, with Plato as the symbol of truth. Like Weaver, Strauss posited ancient, Platonic natural right against relativistic modernity. To Bloom it was this critique that explained the unpopularity of Strauss in academia. By

> calling into question the presuppositions of modern scholarship as well as much of its result, he offended many scholars committed to its method and the current interpretation of its tradition. By speaking of natural right and the community founded on the *polis*, he angered the defenders of a certain orthodoxy which insisted that liberty is threatened by the consideration of these alternatives. By his critique of the fact–value distinction and the behavioural science which emerged from it, he aroused the indignation of many social scientists because he seemed to be challenging both their scientific project and the vision of society subtly bound up with it.[35]

In Drury's version of Strauss's thought, academia had it backwards. To Drury, Strauss's attack on relativism was an exoteric cover for his real, esoteric embrace of nihilism. She emphasized that Strauss's Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon were amoral atheists who used religiosity for political ends. Strauss was accordingly also lying when he justified a belief in natural right and he was really looking for a new way to justify conventional, but unfounded, beliefs. The Straussian dispute with morally relativistic modernity was only that modernism expressed its beliefs openly whereas Straussians lied to 'protect' the ignorant masses. Stephen Holmes has also asserted that Strauss did not really believe in natural rights. Like Drury, he argued that Strauss's vision for society really boiled down to 'hedonism for the philosophical elite, for the "real men" who find pleasure in knowledge; piety and self-sacrifice [. . .] for all the rest'.[36] This was not completely at odds with some of Strauss's own students' interpretations. According to Stanley Rosen, Strauss spoke privately of Plato's Ideas as 'problems' with which philosophers grapple. However, 'if the Platonic Ideas in the traditional or Platonic sense are replaced by problems, then the foundations are removed' for thought. As a result, Strauss was 'dangerously close to Nietzsche'.[37] Other Straussians have also spoken of the Forms as 'permanent problems'[38]

and Strauss occasionally hinted agreement.[39] The fact that Strauss did not explicitly provide arguments against relativism, only against the problems it unleashed, might also suggest that he did not dispute the underlying principle.

The issue of natural law, which Strauss defined as 'a law which determines what is right and wrong and which has power or is valid by nature, inherently, hence everywhere and always',[40] versus relativism (the logical consequence, in Strauss's view, of positivism and historicism) was at the heart of *Natural Right and History* and expanded upon in later works. According to the Straussians Catherine and Michael Zuckert, Strauss really meant Heidegger when he talked about radical historicism,[41] and therefore the suggestion that historicism weakened Western civilization can perhaps be seen as Strauss thinking through how a philosopher he respected above all contemporaries ended up accepting the Nazi regime. Heidegger's philosophy led him to embrace nihilism, and nihilism cleared the way for Nazism. *Natural Right and History* was therefore Strauss's attempt to 'overcome Heideggerian "Destruktion" through a recovery of the tradition'.[42] It was also Strauss's most influential text for contemporary conservatives: this work 'energized conservatives against liberal "relativism"',[43] and part of this success was surely due to the way in which its concerns seemed to mesh so well with those of contemporary conservatives (such as Weaver).

However, as with other Straussian positions, critics such as Drury have read into the work an alternative viewpoint. Though it opened with an apparently sympathetic discussion of the Declaration of Independence, to Drury the entire work was really 'intended to undermine the whole idea of natural rights'.[44] Even a Straussian defender has admitted that Strauss's writings on America 'follow the pattern he detects in all careful writers'. To Smith, this meant 'a pious and patriotic teaching at the beginning and end of a discourse and a more cautiously expressed but subversive teaching in the middle or in other out-of-the-way places'.[45]

Before discussing Strauss's use of classical writings to provide a philosophical alternative to modernity, it makes sense to outline that critique. His assessment shared striking similarities, alongside important differences, with the critique of modernity fashioned by Eric Voegelin during the 1950s. According to Strauss, liberals appeared 'to believe that our inability to acquire any genuine knowledge of what is intrinsically good or right compels us to be tolerant of every

opinion about good or right or to recognize all "civilizations" as equally respectable'.[46] Thus liberal social scientists

> teach that every society rests, in the last analysis, on specific values or on specific myths, i.e., on assumptions which are not evidently superior or preferable to any alternative assumptions . . . They fail to see, however, that this state of things creates a tension between the requirements of social science (knowledge of the truth and teaching of the truth) and the requirements of society (whole-hearted acceptance of the principles of society): if I know that the principles of liberal democracy are not intrinsically superior to the principles of communism or fascism, I am incapable of whole-hearted commitment to liberal democracy.[47]

This would appear to hint at a problem; was Strauss criticizing social scientists because their accounts were wrong (i.e. Strauss believed that liberal democracy was demonstrably morally superior to communism and fascism) or because their accounts were a dangerous truth? In his later *The City and Man* (1964), he seemed to be more certain that social science was in error, rather than too truthful. Strauss considered the return to ancient philosophy, not as an act of romanticism or antiquarianism, but a necessity imposed by 'the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West'. He admitted that classical political philosophy 'lacked the alleged insight into the difference between facts and values',[48] which implied that the fact–value distinction was the error, but he did not say how classical political philosophy would actually judge these modern political systems differently. To a patriotic, conservative reader, the implication may have seemed obvious (that, of course, the USA was superior to its rivals), but one wonders if instead Strauss was suggesting that the superiority of classical philosophy really lay in its alleged esotericism. He might have judged the USA as critically as any social scientist, but he would do so esoterically so as not to undermine public confidence in the regime.

The Dangers of Modern Social Science

The danger of social science – because of its inability to distinguish right from wrong and therefore to defend what was right – was a recurring theme in Strauss's work. Western civilization and liberal

democracy were in crisis, and he criticized political science for fiddling while Rome burned. Its only excuse was that 'it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns'.[49] Since value-free social science did not take a side in conflicts between 'good' and 'evil', social scientists would inevitably develop a 'state of indifference' indistinguishable from nihilism.[50] Whereas the Declaration of Independence stated that all men were 'created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights', modern social science was 'dedicated to the proposition that all men are endowed by the evolutionary process or by mysterious fate with many kinds of urges and aspirations, but certainly with no natural right'. However, without natural right there was no recourse to a right higher than the law, meaning that all right became dependent on the society which made the laws and there could be no appeal against unjust laws.[51]

For supposedly value-free social science 'the objective answers receive their meaning from the subjective questions'. In the work of Max Weber, 'social science positivism reached its final form by realizing or decreeing that there is a fundamental difference between facts and values, and that only factual judgements are within the competence of science: scientific social science is incompetent to provide value judgements'. The fact–value distinction allowed the social scientist to avoid 'serious discussion of serious issues by the simple device of passing them off as value problems'. Strauss echoed Weaver in arguing that, without Platonic 'timeless values', the values of social science were simply 'dependent on the society to which the social science in question belongs, i.e. on history [. . .] Reflection on social science as a historical phenomenon leads to the relativization of social science'. This led to historicism, in which 'even the distinction between facts and values is abandoned', modern scientific thought became just one possible way among many of looking at the world, and the historical process was not recognized as being in any way progressive or reasonable.[52]

Strauss accepted that 'a close relation exists between each political philosophy and the historical situation in which it emerged' but disagreed with the historicist conclusion from this that therefore 'no political philosophy can reasonably claim to be valid beyond the historical situation in which it is essentially related'. In Strauss's view, the historicists did 'not make sufficient allowance for the deliberate adaptation, on the part of the political philosophers of the past, of their

views to the prejudices of their contemporaries'. The great thinkers of the past were often writing tracts rather than essays and therefore combined their view of the truth with what they considered 'intelligible on the basis of the generally received opinions' of the time. In addition, the 'obvious possibility is overlooked that the situation to which one particular doctrine is related, is particularly favourable to the discovery of the truth'.[53]

As well as rejecting the value-neutrality of social science, Strauss also criticized its egalitarian character. According to Strauss, social science had veered towards democracy because in focusing on facts it had searched for evidence that was measurable and frequent. As a result, it had tended towards surveys and interviews, which gave results skewed towards the average (rather than the best). Furthermore, 'by teaching the equality of all values, by denying that there are things which are intrinsically high and others which are intrinsically low as well as by denying that there is an essential difference between men and brutes, it unwittingly contributes to the victory of the gutter'.[54]

The Emergence of Modernity

Strauss posited Machiavelli as the founder of modern political philosophy and argued that all modern political philosophies derived from him a 'rejection of the classical scheme as unrealistic', by which he meant the classical aim of working out the best regime. According to Strauss, Machiavelli believed that, since it was highly improbable that the best regime could ever be realized, it made more sense to lower one's aspirations and calculate instead the best ways to achieve realistic goals. For Strauss, this was the key difference between ancient and modern political philosophy. Moderns do not define the common good based upon virtue, but instead define virtue based upon whatever happen to be the current goals of society. Consequently, ends justify means and 'virtue is nothing but civic virtue, patriotism or devotion to collective selfishness'. According to Machiavelli, all societies were originally based upon injustice, and justice itself was not something that could be achieved through education, but by the creation of institutions which make injustice unprofitable. This transformation from building character to building institutions that would control behaviour was a 'corollary of the belief in the almost infinite malleability of man'.[55]

Religious persecution, which Machiavelli believed was 'the unintended but not surprising consequence of man's aiming too high', was another reason to lower goals. Ultimately, through Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, the thought of Machiavelli led to that of Nietzsche, who had taught 'that all human life and human thought ultimately rests on horizon-forming creations which are not susceptible of rational legitimization'.[56] Hence, Nietzsche and then Heidegger destroyed any rational basis for modern natural right. According to Bloom, 'Strauss agreed that rationalism had indeed reached an impasse. What he was not so sure of was whether the fate of reason itself was bound to that of modern philosophy'.[57] Accordingly, Strauss came close to nihilism in thinking that modern rationalism ultimately rested on subjective, fluid foundations; but he rejected it in deciding that classical philosophy remained a valid alternative.

Eric Voegelin

At this point it makes sense to interrupt our discussion of Strauss briefly in order to consider a similar criticism of social science during this period, that of Eric Voegelin. Voegelin had been a professor of law in Vienna until dismissed from his position after the 1938 takeover of Austria by Nazi Germany. In Vienna he had known Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, and had undertaken a course in Greek history under Eduard Meyer in Berlin in 1922. He was also strongly influenced by Max Weber, Alfred Weber, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee in his comparative approach to social structures.[58] After a short stay in Switzerland, he escaped to America in the early 1940s and worked at Louisiana State University from 1942 until 1958, when he returned to Europe.

In 1952 he published his *New Science of Politics*, which quickly established Voegelin as a seminal thinker for intellectuals on the Right. The popularity of the *New Science of Politics* within the 1950s conservative movement may seem surprising, because it is anything but an easy read (for example, 'gnostic speculation overcame the uncertainty of faith by receding from transcendence and endowing man and his intramundane range of action with the meaning of eschatological fulfilment').[59] Like Weaver and Strauss, Voegelin perceived a crisis in the contemporary West. However, Voegelin blamed Joachim of Flora (*c*.1135–1202), rather than William of Occam or Machiavelli, for the

modern crisis. Joachim had foretold the coming of heaven on Earth and had created his own timetable for the return of Christ. According to Voegelin, Joachim had developed the essential symbols and ideational structures for all the modern (secularized) utopian movements which succeeded him. The symbols were: the division of history into three ages, the symbolism of a paracletic leader, the prophet of a new age (sometimes the same person), and a 'brotherhood of autonomous persons', reflected in Marxism, Nazism, Hegelian dialectic and the theories of Comte. All these movements Voegelin labelled 'gnostic', which he defined as the plan to build heaven on Earth. The substitution for the transcendence of the soul had taken a number of forms: 'through the literary and artistic achievement which secured the immortality of fame for the humanistic intellectual, through the discipline and economic success which certified the salvation to the Puritan saint, through the civilizational contributions of the liberals and progressives, and, finally, through the revolutionary action that will establish the communist or some other Gnostic millennium'.[60]

Voegelin was seeking to develop a theory of politics which was at the same time a 'theory of history'. He labelled this approach a 'restoration'; the two fields were 'inseparably united when political science was founded by Plato'. Nonetheless, unlike Strauss, Voegelin did not believe that such a restoration could be achieved 'through Platonism', because he viewed his attempt as grounded in the 'concrete, historical situation of the age'. Thus, whilst he suggested that 'much can be learned from earlier philosophers', the 'historicity of human existence [. . .] precludes a reformulation of principles through return to a former concreteness'. This approach signals a divergence between the historicist Voegelin and the absolutist Strauss. Whilst Strauss viewed historicism as the logical progression from positivism (and a short step away from nihilism), Voegelin, a historicist, saw his work as a 'recovery from the destruction of science which characterized the positivistic era'.[61] So although Strauss and Voegelin were both anti-positivist, Voegelin was pro-historicist. He had articulated his perspective on Platonism in an earlier work:

> Platonism in politics is the attempt, perhaps hopeless and futile, to regenerate a disintegrating society spiritually by creating the model of a true order of values, and by realistically using as

> the material for the model the elements which are present in the substance of the society. The *Politeia* as well as the *Nomoi* have their superb richness because Plato built them out of the best materials of Hellenic society, of the mythical law-givers and the enlightened tyrants, of the martial virtues of Sparta and the civilizational refinements of Athens, of the humble Attic peasants and the craftsmen and traders of the cities – all wrought together in an order glowing with the spiritual light that pervades it from the mystical source in the Idea of the Good. If not man, the *Politeia* at least is Hellenic man written large.[62]

In contrast, Strauss saw Greek truths as independent of the environment in which they had been thought: he rejected any notion that classical philosophy was 'refuted, as some seem to believe, by the mere fact that the city, apparently the central object of classical political philosophy, has been superseded by the modern state'.[63]

Unlike Weaver, Voegelin was not anti-scientific, and he accepted that progress had been made in many areas. He did echo Weaver in arguing that the adoption of scientific methodology in traditionally non-scientific fields had been problematic, and he took issue with the view of social scientists that 'a study of reality could qualify as scientific only if it used the methods of the natural sciences'. Consequently, any 'problems couched in other terms were illusionary problems'. For Voegelin, this led to the erroneous view that metaphysical 'realms of being did not exist'.[64]

Voegelin's Critique of Social Science

Like Strauss, Voegelin saw positivism and its antipathy to value judgements as integral to modern error. He accepted that positivism included a wide spectrum of views which made generalizations difficult, but they nonetheless shared one common weakness: the attempt to make the social sciences objective through a 'methodically rigorous exclusion of all "value judgements"'. In addition, he spent a long section debunking Max Weber. It was in the person of Max Weber that positivism 'ran to the end of its immanent logic'. Nonetheless, Voegelin showed Weber more respect than Strauss did. Despite faulting the fact–value distinction, Voegelin argued that Weber's own greatness as a teacher 'gave the lie' to his rejection of value judgements;

> The science of Weber supposedly left the values of the students untouched, since the values were beyond science. The political principles of the students could not be formed by a science which did not extend to principles of order. Could it perhaps have the indirect effect of inviting the students to revise their values when they realized what unsuspected, and perhaps undesired, consequences their political ideas would have in practice? But in that case the values of the students would not be quite so demonically fixed. An appeal to judgement would be possible, and what could a judgement that resulted in a reasoned preference of value over value be but a value judgement?

Nonetheless, the consequence of Weber for modern thought was the 'sinking of historical and political sciences into a morass of relativism'.[65]

Beyond academia, modern society was itself saturated with Gnosticism. 'A line of gradual transformation connects medieval with contemporary Gnosticism', which has taken forms such as liberalism, Marxism and Nazism. Ultimately, 'totalitarianism, defined as the existential rule of Gnostic activists, is the end form of progressive civilization'.[66] Whereas Strauss thought liberalism's intellectual defect was its inability to effectively resist totalitarianism, Voegelin viewed liberalism and totalitarianism as two forms of the same phenomenon: modernity. Communism was simply the 'radical expression' of liberalism.[67] He summarized what he meant by modernity in his discussion of Nazi Germany – 'economic materialism, racist biology, corrupt psychology, scientism, and technological ruthlessness – in brief, modernity without restraint'.[68] Thus, both Strauss and Voegelin criticized modernity for its apparent moral relativism, and both viewed Platonic philosophy as the potential way to solve the modern 'crisis'. For Voegelin, Plato had set the example of a thinker building up new values in resistance to relativist attack. But he viewed Plato as a man of his time, and thought that a new, Platonic attempt to resist relativism would need to be adapted to the modern age. In contrast, Strauss viewed Platonic philosophy as genuinely universal; the answer to the 'modern crisis' could be found in a rediscovery of the ancients' esoteric message on natural law.

Strauss on Natural Right

An interesting Straussian problem occurs when we try to establish what exactly he thought the ancients' message was. In *Natural Right and History*, he critiqued modernity and the work is littered with references to ancient texts. But if Strauss read those texts unconventionally, his citations alone might mislead us if we read those texts conventionally. He made frequent references to classical authors, but without explaining what their writings meant – only later did he write commentaries on some of the works cited. The most we can do is outline Strauss's overall argument and discuss in general terms how his references to ancient texts are integrated into his argument. Though there was nothing inherently irreligious about natural right – for God might have created a universe in which 'right' was reflected in nature – natural right was incompatible with religion, according to Strauss, because of its origins. The emergence of natural right was coeval with the emergence of political philosophy. Before the discovery (or creation) of natural right, the 'authority' of earlier ages and customs were taken for granted; the 'emergence of the idea of natural right presupposes, therefore, the doubt of authority'.[69]

Strauss suggested that Plato made this point implicitly in his *Laws* and *Republic* by the way those dialogues developed. In *Laws* the participants were walking in the footsteps of Minos to the cave of Zeus, but no indication was given that they reached their goal. In the *Republic*, the conversation on natural rights began only after the representative of custom, Cephalus, had left to sacrifice. Accordingly, the emergence of natural right could only occur when religious belief was weakened, because if 'man knows by divine revelation what the right path is, he does not have to discover that path by his unassisted efforts'. Henceforth, the argument that the world was created by superhuman beings required 'a demonstration that starts from all we can see now'.[70] To support this argument, Strauss provided a number of Platonic references without explaining how they supported his interpretation. When examined, these citations only partially corroborate his argument. For example, *Laws* showed the Athenian stranger telling his companions that reason was needed because people no longer accepted what they were told without receiving proofs (which the Athenian Stranger seemed to lament, though perhaps ironically).[71] Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* critiqued a Pythagorean interpretation of the universe, used logic to

question why the gods needed to drink nectar, and discussed the material make-up of the universe[72] – all examples of using reason to assess reality and supportive of Strauss's point; but only if we already accept Strauss's view that using reason is incompatible with a religious perspective. He went on to suggest that the ancients were anti-historicist, since they 'granted on all sides that there cannot be natural right if the principles of right are not unchangeable'[73] and he referenced Aristotle[74] to support his point.

Strauss also discussed conventionalism, which has been esoterically read as his 'true' teaching by critics like Drury. According to Strauss, 'the so-called "justice" of robbers is in the service of manifest injustice. But is not exactly the same true of the city? [...] there is no reason why collective selfishness should claim to be more respectable than the selfishness of the individual ... are the maxims of foreign policy essentially different from the maxims on which gangs act?'[75] In support he referenced, without discussion, Plato's *Republic*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.[76] The first cited section of the *Republic* described the just man harming neither friends nor enemies, whilst the second described robbers needing justice amongst themselves – to refute Thrasymachus' point that the most unjust people would be the most successful (i.e. even unjust people need some justice to achieve their aims). On the face of it these citations suggested that Strauss held the straightforward (exoteric) view of Socrates. The Xenophon reference, in which Socrates says that he never wronged anybody, seems to support this view, as do the references to Aristotle, which observe that law is the interest of the ruling class (the Thrasymachean view) whereas justice is acting in the interest of others. But, according to Strauss, experience showed that 'hardly any cities act justly except when they are compelled to do so ... [which] merely confirms what was shown before, that justice has no basis in nature. The common good proved to be the selfish interest of a collective.'[77] Thus Strauss subverted the Socratic argument at this point.

Whereas Socrates was arguing that justice helps people to get along (even robbers), Strauss read this as saying that cities were identical with those bands of robbers and that justice was worthwhile only in small doses in order to achieve selfish ends. Justice 'appears to be derivative from selfishness and subservient to it'[78] and the truly just man is 'unwise or a fool'. Here Strauss provided a number of classical citations

(again, without explicit interpretation); Plato's *Republic*, and *Protagoras*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.[79] The Aristotle sections indicate that justice meant acting in the interest of others, and support Strauss's point only if we already accept that such action was foolish. The *Republic* citations refer to Thrasymachus' argument that just men were foolish. Likewise, the *Protagoras* reference is to Protagoras' argument that men can plan well even when doing wrong. These citations support Strauss's argument providing we accept the radical Straussian interpretation that Socrates and his opponents were actually in agreement on the essential issues (i.e. that Socrates only 'seems' to defeat Thrasymachus and Protagoras in argument). The section from *Memorabilia* shows Socrates advising that one should act kindly to strangers so that they would reciprocate the kindness (i.e. that kindness has a selfish motive). Socrates was commonly portrayed making this implicit argument by Xenophon, which some scholars[80] have interpreted as evidence that Xenophon simply did not fully understand Socrates' philosophy. This may partially explain why Strauss focused so much on Xenophon – because Xenophon's Socrates was easier to fit into a Straussian cast.

Strauss posited two forms of conventionalism – vulgar (as practised by Thrasymachus) and philosophic (as practised by Epicureans – the good life means a life of philosophy with as little to do with civil society as possible). For the Epicureans, real 'life according to nature requires such perfect inner freedom from the power of convention as is combined with the appearance of conventional behaviour'. This meant that 'life according to nature is the preserve of a small minority, of the natural elite, of those who are truly men and not born to be slaves'. The paradox of the sophist was that he must display his wisdom to receive fame and prestige, but his wisdom consisted in recommending that people pretend to be just whilst being unjust, yet admitting that meant the sophist's own pretence of justice was ended. Accordingly, the sophist ended up preaching conventional morality.[81] But was this not what Strauss's philosophers did too? Strauss actually wrote, in *The City and Man*, that Thrasymachus was tamed by Socrates partly through the superiority and cleverness of the latter's arguments, but partly because Thrasymachus' 'principle [that justice is simply the interests of the stronger party] remains victorious'.[82] So both sophists and philosophers had an exoteric teaching of conventional morality, but they secretly held

another philosophy, dangerous to society. Without going as far as Drury, one could argue that this was an example of Strauss's esoteric writing; he agreed with Epicurus on natural inequality and he agreed with the sophists on the necessity of preaching conventional views – so could he have also agreed with the sophists' alleged teaching of injustice too? Thus, to an unwary reader Strauss had criticized the sophists and Epicurus, but to a reader alive to the possibility of 'secret teachings', a more sinister message emerges.

Classic Natural Right

Strauss suggested that according to conventional readings, Socrates turned away from the nature/convention distinction and instead identified law with nature, and thereby 'restored the ancestral morality'.[83] Strauss disagreed with this interpretation, arguing that it 'mistakes Socrates' ambiguous starting point or the ambiguous result of his enquiries for the substance of his thought [...] the distinction between nature and law (convention) retains its full significance for Socrates'. Strauss cited a number of classical texts in support: Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, and Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*.[84] The passages in the *Republic*, for example those on the naturalness of female guardians and nude female exercise, support Strauss's argument. However, in *The City and Man*, in discussing the *Republic* Strauss wrote that Plato's city was actually against nature. According to Strauss, 'the good city is not possible then without a fundamental falsehood; it cannot exist in the element of truth, of nature'.[85] The just city was impossible to achieve because it was unnatural and it was unnatural because 'the equality of the sexes and absolute communism are against nature. It holds no attraction except for such lovers of justice as are willing to destroy the family'.[86]

According to Strauss, 'the *Republic* conveys the broadest and deepest analysis of political idealism ever made' and its conclusion is that the ideal city portrayed is ultimately 'against nature'.[87] Thus Strauss's reading of the *Republic*, as an indictment of idealism, contradicted his earlier portrayal of Plato's *Republic* as 'natural'. The reference to *Laws* also raises questions. The Athenian Stranger argues there that people were naturally ambidextrous but that convention made them right-handed. This would support Strauss's point about nature/convention being a theme in Plato. The reference to the *Oeconomicus* also superficially appears to support Strauss's point, showing as it did a character telling his wife

to do what nature had fitted her to do – but Strauss's later commentary on the *Oeconomicus* portrayed Ischomachos as a slightly buffoonish character, potentially undermining our respect for the quality of his advice.

Nevertheless, Strauss's Socrates was not entirely critical of conventional opinion, which, in fact, played a key role in his search for truth:

> Socrates started in his understanding of the natures of things from the opinions about their natures. For every opinion is based on some awareness, on some perception with the mind's eye, of something. Socrates implied that disregarding the opinions about the natures of things would amount to abandoning the most important vestiges of the truth which are within our reach.

Strauss was no dogmatist, though, in terms of what the 'truths' were, stating that there was no guarantee that philosophy could ever get 'beyond an understanding of the fundamental alternatives or that philosophy will ever legitimately go beyond the stage of discussion or disputation and will ever reach the stage of decision'.[88] So we are back to Rosen's description of Strauss's belief in eternal problems rather than eternal Forms.

For Strauss, the essence of convention was 'the identification of the good with the pleasant. Accordingly, the basic part of the classic natural right teaching is the critique of hedonism'. He suggested that, since reason separated men from animals, 'the proper work of man consists in living thoughtfully, in understanding, and in thoughtful action'.[89] Again, he cited a number of classical texts without explanation: Plato's *Gorgias*, which argues that the pleasant should exist for the sake of the good, not vice versa, and the *Republic* (which does not seem relevant to Strauss's point), and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which argues that 'the good life is the exercise of thought in agreement with virtue'.[90]

Since 'man is by nature a social being', his sociability was not based upon the pleasure he derived from society, but his pleasure in society came from his social nature. Since his nature was social, 'the perfection of his nature includes the social virtue par excellence, justice; justice and right are natural'.[91] This seems to rebut Drury's depiction of Strauss. He went on to write that even the myths of Athens reflect a natural

appreciation of justice: 'why did the Athenians believe in autochthony, except because they knew that robbing others of their land is not just and because they felt that a self-respecting society cannot become reconciled to the notion that its foundation was laid in crime?' Strauss again provided citations of ancient sources in support of his argument (from Plato's *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Laws*, and Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*),[92] but they could again be interpreted differently. The *Republic* passage referred to Adeimantus' city – but there is no suggestion in that discussion of any original crime (the citizens come together in mutual need). The *Symposium* section states nothing regarding the founding of states. The *Laws* segment is a discussion of slavery, which may seem to indicate crime to a modern reader but there is no indication that it was considered one by Plato. The sections in the *Politics* talk not about crimes but about men coming together through common interests and sociability. The first passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* concerns the impossibility of friendship between a free man and a slave, which may again be morally repugnant to a modern audience but was not necessarily so to an ancient one. The second passage simply says that a virtuous man 'enjoys actions that conform with virtue and dislikes those that spring from wickedness'. This suggests that Aristotle's virtuous man would dislike a state founded in crime, but not necessarily that he would accept the crime and cover it up. Accordingly, it can be seen that none of these extracts effectively support Strauss's argument.

Nonetheless, Strauss suggested a contrast here with Machiavelli, who had argued that all states were founded in crime; however, in Strauss's reading the difference lay in the explanation rather than the fact. The ancients did not disagree with Machiavelli that states were founded in crime – what they believed was that myths were necessary to hide those original crimes.

The Crisis of Modern Natural Right

A key issue for Strauss in considering ancient natural right was that, since the perfection of individuals was the ultimate purpose of society and individuals have different intellectual and moral capacities, classical natural right was not egalitarian.[93] In contrast, modern natural right led to ever-greater equality. According to Strauss, the shift to modern natural right was largely undertaken by Locke, who seemed to be in the classical tradition but actually radicalized it and had much in common

with Hobbes. Hobbes' rejection of classical natural right could be traced back to one key disagreement: Hobbes denied that 'man is by nature a political or social animal'. Hobbes therefore joined the Epicureans in believing that 'the good is fundamentally identical with the pleasant', and he instilled this apolitical belief into the political tradition, thus creating 'political hedonism', which Strauss described as 'an epoch-making change'. This was combined with the change wrought by Machiavelli that political philosophy should henceforth orient itself based upon how people really lived, not from how they ought to live. Hence, while Hobbes maintained the idea of natural law, he separated it from any goal of man's becoming virtuous. The result was that natural law was based upon passion, especially fear, rather than reason. Consequently the goal of the state should be self-preservation and material comfort, rather than increased virtue; hence Hobbes was the real founder of liberalism. Locke's disagreement with Hobbes was about the best way of securing man's natural rights, but they agreed about what those natural rights were and that the aims of the state were materialist rather than ethical.[94]

Rousseau had criticized modernity as represented by Hobbes and Locke by appealing to the Classics; but, paradoxically, his efforts moved modern thought even further away from its classical origins. Rousseau rejected Hobbes' brutal account of the state of nature, but inserted a state of nature in which the noble savages were essentially non-human (and therefore useless for devising natural standards for modern man). In this way, Rousseau undermined the entire natural rights doctrine. Finally, Burke tried to revive classical natural right – accepting that people were formed with inalienable natural rights to happiness, he added that only through virtue could such happiness be accomplished.[95] Nonetheless, even in opposing the modernity of the French Revolution, he had 'recourse to the same fundamental principle which is at the bottom of the revolutionary theorems and which is alien to all earlier thought'. His faith in accident and history to produce good order, with only a little tinkering became a faith in the 'historical process' – that good order could be the result of forces which were not themselves inherently good. His faith in natural forces rather than human reason to design a good order was the result of Burke's belief that 'the natural is the individual, and the universal is a creature of the understanding'. For Strauss then, 'the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns concerns eventually,

and perhaps even from the beginning, the status of "individuality"', and in that respect Burke was on the side of the moderns.[96] Accordingly, both Burkean conservatism and liberalism were 'modern' and Strauss was therefore at odds with contemporary American Burkeans such as Russell Kirk.

Whereas Weaver had made the case against relativism dependent upon its harmful effects on society, Strauss discussed those effects but made the point that the case for natural right needed to be based on more than its beneficial impact on society. Just because the abandonment of a belief in natural right had harmful effects did not make natural right true. Strauss warned of the dangers of 'pursuing a Socratic goal with the means, and temper, of a Thrasymachus'.[97] Nonetheless, a fuller argument for natural right, elucidating what exactly it meant to Strauss, was left for his later, more obscure commentaries on Xenophon and Plato.

Strauss and Democracy

Strauss acknowledged that modern critics of classical political philosophy reproached it for being anti-democratic and critics like Drury have levelled the same charge at Strauss. Even his defenders have had to admit that his 'endorsement of liberal democracy could not have included an endorsement of its explicit philosophical underpinnings'.[98] In *What is Political Philosophy?*, Strauss countered this criticism with two arguments. First, he claimed that Plato was not as anti-democratic as often portrayed: for example, Strauss suggested that Plato believed that 'since the principle of democracy is freedom, all human types can develop in a democracy, and hence in particular the best human type'. Nonetheless, Strauss's Plato did not view this strength of democracy as decisive, because 'the aim of human life, and hence of social life, is not freedom but virtue'. Virtue required education, which required leisure, which required wealth, whereas the majority of humankind would always be poor, so democracy must always be 'government by the uneducated'. He criticized Rousseau for arguing that 'man is by nature good'.[99] Since modern Western society also seemed to accept that an educated populace was needed for a democracy to work, and hence pursued the goal of universal education, Strauss argued that there was little difference between the modern attitude and that of Plato.

In *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, Strauss defended liberal education as the only way for a democratic state to produce 'an aristocracy which has broadened into a universal aristocracy'. Liberal education was 'the counter-poison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture'. This again seems to indicate that he saw liberal education as capable of turning the entirety of society virtuously wise. However, Strauss went on to describe his liberal aristocracy as an 'aristocracy within democratic mass society', suggesting that most would really still be excluded from the elite. Strauss also maintained that people had different abilities and that not everyone was cut out to be a philosopher, regardless of their education. If they were unfit to understand 'by nature', would mass education provide understanding? This then reads as an exoteric argument, expressing a wholesome idea (with modern mass education and democracy everybody could be a philosopher king) at odds with Strauss's real, esoteric opinion that only a few brilliant individuals are ever worthy of rule. Thus, even with modern technology, Strauss's summary of ancient democracy may well reflect his attitude to modern democracy: 'democracy is rejected because it is as such the rule of the uneducated'.[100]

Notwithstanding this evidence, according to Bloom, Strauss was deeply attached to American democracy both in gratitude because it had given him sanctuary and because 'he knew that liberal democracy is the only decent and just alternative available to modern man'. But he also knew that liberal democracy was exposed to 'threats both practical and theoretical [. . .] among those threats is the aspect of modern philosophy that makes it impossible to give rational credence to the principles of the American regime, thereby eroding conviction of the justice of its cause'.[101] Nevertheless, Strauss's reticence in commenting on contemporary political issues makes it difficult to establish his real attitude to modern democracy. Strauss was a believer in classical natural right and he interpreted classical natural right as anti-egalitarian. Whereas, for modern 'egalitarian natural right, consent takes precedence over wisdom, from the point of view of classic natural right, wisdom takes precedence over consent'. Accordingly, it is clear that his anti-egalitarianism would make any attachment to democracy problematic. 'According to the Classics, the best way of meeting these two entirely different requirements – that for wisdom and that for consent or for freedom – would be that a wise legislator frame a code which the citizen

body, duly persuaded, freely adopts'. Was Strauss thinking of or appealing to the US here? It should come as no surprise that a number of Straussians after Strauss, such as Walter Berns and Harry Jaffa, focused upon the American constitution rather than ancient political thought. Strauss's summary in *Natural Right and History* argued that the best regime was the one ruled by the wise, an aristocracy, but the practically best was a regime ruled by aristocratic gentlemen under a written and unalterable constitution of law.[102]

Strauss was most revealing when he seemed to be at odds with his classical sources, such as his argument that 'the Classics' believed that 'civil life requires the dilution of natural right by merely conventional right. Natural right would act as dynamite for civil society.'[103] This is interesting for three reasons. Firstly, the evidence that classical writers believed that the naturally good had to be merged with the conventionally good is limited. In support of his view, Strauss cited a number of Platonic passages (as usual, without detailing or commenting on their contents): *Republic* 414b8–415d5, which discussed the need for a myth of autochthony to encourage love of the city and to justify different metal-themed statuses; *Republic* 501a9–c2 and *Laws* 739, which said that the level of sharing in the ideal city goes beyond nature; and *Laws* 757a5–758a2, which said that justice 'consists in granting the inequality that unequals deserve to get' (but it would be impossible to put this fully into place in practice). But these examples could more plausibly be seen to argue that convention had to be subservient to nature, rather than the reverse. Secondly, since he had already written that Socrates' version of natural right differed from that of the sophists in recommending justice ahead of selfishness, it is hard to see how this version of natural right would act as social dynamite? Surely Thrasymachean nature would be more explosive? The answer may be that Strauss's Socrates was concealing the real position, which was more like the explosive reality portrayed by Thrasymachus.

Finally, the argument that natural right needed to be submerged beneath convention comes back to consent, which Strauss had already argued the ancients valued less highly than wisdom. It seems to be in modernity, which valued consent more highly, that natural right needs to be joined with convention to gain acceptance. According to Strauss, 'to admit the necessity of consent, i.e., of the consent of the unwise, amounts to admitting a right of unwisdom, i.e., an irrational, if

inevitable, right. Civil life requires a fundamental compromise between wisdom and folly.'[104] So he seems to have been at odds with classical writers in arguing that natural rights needed to be diluted by convention, but the divergence is related to a difference between ancient and political regimes. In an ancient ideal state, the best would rule and convention could be heeded less; whereas in a modern democratic state the people were in control and, since they were incapable of achieving complete virtue, this necessitated a greater role for convention in ensuring their control.

In Strauss's commentary on the *Republic*, he claimed that democracy was the least bad actual regime, because it was the only one in which philosophy was possible. Nonetheless, Socrates, and by extension Strauss, 'surely did not prefer democracy to all other regimes in speech', because Socrates thought also of the non-philosophers, and for them a regime in which virtue was encouraged ahead of freedom would be better. In Strauss's version of the *Republic*, the work showed 'what character the city would have to be in order to satisfy the highest needs of man. By letting us see that the city constructed in accordance with the requirement is not possible, he lets us see the essential limits, the nature, of the city'.[105] So this was one of Strauss's eternal problems – democracy was best for the philosopher as it allowed him freedom to philosophize, but aristocracy was best for the multitude as their rulers would rule in the multitude's best interest (but the philosophers had to rule instead of philosophizing).

Case Study: Strauss's Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the *Oeconomicus*

For a more detailed insight into Strauss's methodology, and to explore an important but often under-examined area of Strauss's thought, I will now examine key episodes from Strauss's interpretation of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. This emphasis on Xenophon may appear somewhat startling – partly because Strauss has been more usually associated with Plato. Even amongst some Straussians, Plato was 'Strauss's highest authority'[106] and '*the* figure to whom Strauss returned again and again throughout his writings'.[107] According to Myles Burnyeat, the emphasis on Plato made sense because Strauss's depiction of Plato as an anti-idealist was the key plank of Strauss's philosophy – if

that depiction was wrong, 'the entire edifice turns to dust'.[108] Strauss himself referred to Xenophon as his 'special darling'.[109] And, of Strauss's larger works, he published more on Xenophon (separate books on the *Hiero* (1948), *Oeconomicus* (1970)) and *Memorabilia, Apology* and *Symposium* (1972)) than on Plato (one book on the *Laws* (1975) and another which included a section on the *Republic* as well as Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and Aristotle's *Politics* (1964) – Strauss's only large work on Aristotle). Although one of Strauss's posthumous publications was his *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (1983), the title is misleading since only two chapters focused on Platonic dialogues (and one of the other 13 was a commentary on Xenophon's *Anabasis*).

The lack of attention paid to Strauss's work on Xenophon is also due in part to Xenophon's poor reputation in the twentieth century. His nineteenth-century reputation as an honest historian but nonetheless a 'plain man without intellectual subtlety' had been rocked by evidence casting doubt on his description of events in his *Hellenica*.[110] Thus he was deemed dishonest as well as intellectually second-rate. Few philosophers have disputed Bertrand Russell's withering portrait of Xenophon as 'a military man, not very liberally endowed with brains, and on the whole conventional in his outlook'.[111] According to Burnyeat, it was a 'common scholarly opinion that Xenophon, a military man, was incompetent at philosophy and did not understand Socrates'.[112] Even in recent years, despite the more nuanced interpretations of Xenophon by classicists like Vivienne Gray, he is still occasionally belittled for his 'astonishingly unoriginal mind'.[113]

Bloom suggested that Strauss chose to focus on Xenophon because Xenophon 'seems to us a fool but seemed wise to older thinkers',[114] and two other Straussians credit Strauss's readings of Xenophon, alongside those of Maimonides, for his discovery of esotericism in the 1930s.[115] Bloom divided Strauss's works into three phases of which his Xenophontic/Socratic writings form the final stage in his development, when Strauss 'could understand writers as they understood themselves'. At this point the problem of Strauss's meaning becomes even more problematic due to his 'complete abandonment of the form as well as the method of modern scholarship'. Bloom asserted that these books were 'the authentic, the great Strauss, to which all the rest is only *prolegomena*'.[116] And Strauss himself suggested that these were his 'best' works.[117]

I have focused upon Strauss's study of the *Oeconomicus* because Strauss considered the *Oeconomicus* to be Xenophon's definitive treatment of Socrates. In contrast, he believed that Xenophon's other Socratic writings dealt only with aspects of Socrates (for example, *Memorabilia* was concerned with Socratic justice, whereas the *Oeconomicus* 'transcends justice') and felt that the *Oeconomicus* was the most revealing of Xenophon's Socratic works because 'in its central chapter Socrates is directly contrasted with a perfect gentleman'.[118]

Strauss did seem to rate Xenophon more highly than Plato in terms of their accounts of Socrates. Since Xenophon was also a historian, Strauss suggested that, 'it would appear that the primary source for our knowledge of Socrates should be the Socratic writings of Xenophon'. Strauss's 'it would appear' adds a note of caution, and further doubt was encouraged by Strauss's discussion of Xenophon's poor reputation as a historian. But this doubt was itself undercut by being described as a 'prejudice'. Then Strauss, instead of arguing why he thought Xenophon more insightful than he was usually given credit, cited the favourable opinion of Xenophon held by Johann Winckelmann and the 'silent judgement of Machiavelli' (by which Strauss may be referring to the debt owed by *The Prince* to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*). The impression given is that Strauss rated Xenophon highly; but this was never made explicit so, making allowance for Straussian reading between the lines, we cannot be certain. He did though write that our age was 'surely blind to the greatness of Xenophon'.[119]

This somewhat inconclusive series of statements partially explains Strauss's unpopularity amongst classical scholars and reminds the reader of Burnyeat's judgement of Strauss as a 'sphinx without a secret'. One reviewer of Strauss's *Xenophon's Socrates* (1970) described it as 'a tedious paraphrase with comments or questions on major and minor issues. No coherent line of interpretation emerges from his enigmatic asides.'[120] Saunders, reviewing Strauss's *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*, wrote of the 'overinterpretation of nonsignificant detail in defiance of simple common sense' and castigated Strauss's 'confusing and deplorable habit of running together his report of the text and his own comment without clearly distinguishing them'.[121] These comments could be applied to all Strauss's later writings; but, as the following analysis will perhaps suggest, there was much of value too.

Strauss's commentary on the *Oeconomicus* has a very straightforward structure. It contains a four-page introduction, a brief discussion of the title and opening, and the rest of the book is a line-by-line commentary on the *Oeconomicus* (there is no conclusion). It includes no explicit presentation of Strauss's own political ideas. My approach to the work is to highlight key discussions surrounding the theme Strauss considered most important (the comparison between the gentleman and the philosopher), and to elucidate these sections by reading them alongside other works by Strauss.

Strauss's first comment on the text is that the abrupt beginning of the *Oeconomicus* was supposed to make us think that it was simply a continuation of the *Memorabilia* (just as the abrupt 'thereafter' that begins the *Hellenica* implies that work was a continuation of Thucydides' work). In both cases, Strauss argued that it was an illusion designed to make casual readers miss profound differences between the first and second works, whilst signalling the importance of these differences to astute readers. In the case of the *Hellenica*, Strauss wrote elsewhere that the real intention was to show that under Socrates' influence Xenophon 'could no longer take politics as seriously as Thucydides had done'.[122] In this case, the difference was that the *Memorabilia* was concerned with justice whereas the *Oeconomicus* transcended justice. A casual reader would glide from the *Memorabilia* to the *Oeconomicus* but, to one of Strauss's philosophic readers, a message that the later work was not concerned with justice, and that this was important, had been given. He continued that the opening of the *Oeconomicus* was most like the opening of *Memorabilia* II.4–10, which dealt with the theme of friendship but included sections, like II.7, on household management. Strauss suggested enigmatically that we should 'keep in mind the question whether there is a connection between the themes "management of the household" and "friendship"', but he did not say why.[123] Examining the sections Strauss cites, it is clear that those on friendship all suggested that friends were wanted for their usefulness (rather than, say, out of affection), which seems to correspond with Strauss's depiction of Socrates as using utilitarian rather than idealistic reasons to justify concepts like justice.

Strauss returned to the lack of discussion of justice in the *Oeconomicus*, but was Strauss suggesting that Socrates was immoral, as Drury has argued, or did Strauss's Socrates have a more sophisticated conception of

justice than a character as limited as Kritoboulos could understand? Or, as Strauss actually seems to indicate,[124] was Xenophon's Socrates teaching a philosophic form of justice akin to communism? In this reading, property did not belong to the legal owner, as Cyrus' teacher believed in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*,[125] but to whomever needed it most (as Cyrus believed when he agreed with the rightness of the large boy who took the large coat from the small boy and gave him instead his own small coat). This point was similar to that Strauss made regarding the *Republic* when Socrates defined justice as giving to each what they most needed, without regard to legal ownership. Strauss interpreted Polemarchus' opinion to mean that 'justice is full dedication to the common good; it demands that one withhold nothing of his own from the city; it demands therefore by itself absolute communism'.[126]

Strauss's comments in his study of the *Oeconomicus* often appear unclear when read on their own; but they can be better understood with reference to his other works. Strauss contended in *Natural Right and History* that justice meant giving to everybody what was good for them, and also giving things to people who would use them well and taking things away from people who would misuse them; hence, society must be ruled by those wise enough to know what was good for everybody (philosophers). Thus, Strauss concluded that justice was 'incompatible with what is generally understood by private ownership'.[127] There is no suggestion that Strauss was a communist, and the 'by itself' in his description of Polemarchus' view suggests that other factors made communism unattractive; but it also becomes clear that he was not a complete free-marketeer either. This may be a factor in his popularity amongst neoconservatives like Irving Kristol, who started as Marxists in the 1930s but had moved rightwards by the 1960s.

In his commentary on the *Oeconomicus*, Strauss, 'by thinking through Socrates' argument with Kritoboulos', suggested that the implication was that philosophers should manage all possessions and should run society for everybody else's benefit. However, he then indicated that this would be an intolerable burden on the philosophers whose philosophizing would be interfered with. Consequently, Strauss returned to the 'common-sense' view that 'it should be taken for granted that a man's household consists in the first place of what is his by law'.[128] Strauss also observed that Xenophon did not mention the justness of the gentlemanly life, without making clear what this omission could mean.

In another work, when Xenophon was silent on what would be a positive attribute, Strauss argued that Xenophon was politely criticizing the item under discussion for its lack of the quality left unmentioned. Strauss called this a 'practice of great importance'.[129] Thus, in this case, to be a gentleman was to be to some extent unjust. We have here an indication of why Strauss's works were reviewed so poorly when read singly. The enigmatic asides offer no clarity on their own, and only by reference to his other works can a firmer interpretation emerge.

Strauss initially seemed to create a wide and deep divide between the ascetic philosopher and the inherently unjust gentleman. According to Strauss, Socrates initially indicated that anybody who needed the art of increasing wealth must have a defect, for a wise man needed very little. However, Strauss qualified this shortly afterwards based on Socrates' ability to get money from his friends, and this eventually became the position that 'all arts are forms of money-getting' and individuals 'ought to prefer that particular art which is most rewarding in terms of money'.[130] Consequently, when Socrates criticized the indoor trades because they weakened the body and mind, he was simply adapting his teaching to Kritoboulos' gentlemanly prejudices: Strauss gave evidence of this by questioning whether smithing would really make the body soft. Accordingly, Strauss's Socrates adapted his teaching to the limits of the dialogic audience, in this case to aid the financial plight of his friend's unintelligent son. Hence we cannot really count on any of the views expressed by Strauss's Xenophontic Socrates without first asking whether they were really held by Socrates or Xenophon.

In Strauss's view, Socrates' discussion of the Persian Cyrus followed the same pattern. Cyrus was introduced in support of farming because Cyrus' opinion would carry weight with Kritoboulos (i.e. because Cyrus was Kritoboulos' embodiment of 'the gentleman', not, according to Strauss, because Xenophon or Socrates particularly respected Cyrus' views). The defence of farming, that Cyrus' soldiers needed food, hence farming was noble, could equally well be applied to other trades that had already been dismissed as ignoble (the soldiers also needed shoes and weapons, but the king did not take a close interest in cobbling or smithing). All this proved was that the king regarded farming as necessary, not noble. The careful reader would apparently have picked up on this inconsistency and, as Kritoboulos did not, the careful reader was supposed to find this praise of farming an ironic jest against Kritoboulos too.

Strauss's Socrates also subtly improved on the record of the younger Cyrus, and Strauss cited the *Oeconomicus* and *Anabasis*[131] as evidence. These passages both focused on the actions of Cyrus' companions after Cyrus fell in battle, but the differences between them are not great (and could be explained by memory lapses if written years apart). In *Oeconomicus* IV, Cyrus' 'friends fought at his side and fell at his side to a man', except Ariaeus, who was fighting elsewhere and fled the battle when he heard the result. In *Anabasis* I.9.31 all his companions present 'died fighting in his defence' and this showed that he 'knew how to judge those who were faithful, devoted and constant'. But in *Anabasis* II.5.39 a Greek said to Ariaeus, 'Ariaeus, you basest of men, and all you others who were friends of Cyrus' should be ashamed for betraying the Greeks, signifying that Ariaeus was not the only friend who escaped death in the battle. For Strauss, these examples undercut the praise of Cyrus' judgement from the first *Anabasis* section; however, Strauss may be reading too much into such a minor discrepancy: the difference seems to be as much between the two sections of the *Anabasis* as between *Oeconomicus* and *Anabasis*.

Finally, the entire account of Cyrus' praise of farming derives from a report from Lysander, who was a great soldier but a representative of a city which 'spoke against money-making in any form'. As if to underline Lysander's poor judgement, his praise of Cyrus as 'justly happy, for you are happy while being a good man' took place in Sardis. We should thus be reminded of Solon's much earlier meeting there with Croesus.[132] Solon had refused to call Croesus happy and was proved wise when Croesus' fortune changed, whereas Lysander called Cyrus happy and was later proved to have been wrong. These factors together undermined Socrates' apparent praise of farming. Then Socrates gave a second defence of farming based on pleasure in Chapter V, and also on farming's training for the warlike arts, saying that the earth encouraged the strongest to take what they could in the open – which seemed to suggest that the real benefit of farming was that it trained men for war.[133]

A further example of Xenophon's apparent esotericism occurred in Chapter VI when Socrates said they would recapitulate what they had already said. According to Strauss, the summary was very different from what had originally been said. The objective of the summary was therefore 'to teach us something we could not have learned from the first statement'. In the recapitulation Socrates was 'still more silent on the

justice or legality of the acquisition of wealth than he was in Chapter I', there was a 'scrupulous omission of anything reminding one of the Persian king', and Socrates only now introduced the 'perfect gentleman' theme. But the perfect gentleman was introduced through his needs rather than at his best, i.e. 'from a point of view which is rather low'.[134] It is not clear in this context what Strauss meant by this: i.e. what problems or benefits did approaching a subject from the bottom up cause? However, Nietzsche, who (as we saw earlier) had already spoken of esoteric and exoteric writings, went on to write that it was a feature of the exoteric class (the non-philosophers) who viewed issues from low to high, whereas the esoteric thinkers viewed issues from the high to the low.[135] Thus, in pointing out that Xenophon was portraying gentlemen from this 'low' angle, the implication was that it was a portrayal designed for the unsophisticated.

For Strauss, Xenophon's portrayal of Ischomachos was largely ironic, with subtle hints undercutting the apparent praise. The 'perfect gentleman is seldom entirely at leisure, whereas Socrates is so most of the time':[136] thus Ischomachos was not a model for the budding philosopher. Strauss also tentatively suggested that Ischomachos' wife may have been the same mother-in-law of Kallias described in an ancient law court speech by Andocides.[137] She was married to Ischomachos and Andocides recounted how she became the mistress of her own son-in-law, causing her daughter to attempt suicide. If Strauss was correct, the entire description of Ischomachos teaching his wife virtue would appear ironic and humorous to an Athenian audience aware of the disreputable sequel.[138] Ischomachos' daily routine gave other hints of the comic undertone: his servant 'gives the horse a roll and leads it home', just as the comical Pheidippides said to his servant whilst dreaming in *Clouds*.[139] Thus the '*Oeconomicus* is then in a properly subdued manner a comical reply to Aristophanes' comical attack on Socrates', as well as a description of the younger Socrates turning away from his life of idle gossip and towards 'the study of only the human things and the things useful to human beings'.[140] Whereas Socrates ruined a youth in Aristophanes' comedy, in Xenophon's dialogue he saved a youth in danger of ruining himself on frivolous comedies – in Xenophon, Aristophanes was thus the corrupter.

Strauss considered humour to be one of the defining features of Socratic philosophy. In a letter to a friend, he suggested that Xenophon's

work demonstrated what Strauss had indicated in *The City and Man* 'regarding the difference between Socrates and The Bible'.[141] In *The City and Man*, Strauss viewed it as significant that the Bible portrayed Jesus weeping but never laughing, whereas Socrates was depicted laughing but never weeping; however, the reason for this significance was left unclear. Strauss also described Plato's dialogues as similar to comedies rather than tragedies, and the *Republic* as a response to Aristophanes' *Assembly of Women*.[142] There were also other clues, he claimed, to the comedic aspect of the *Oeconomicus*. Kritoboulos pointed out in Chapter III that he might appear ridiculous because he neglected household management whilst attending comedies,[143] and the three areas in which Kritoboulos was 'particularly defective' were farming, horsemanship and his (lack of a) wife – the same three areas which drove Strepsiades to approach Socrates in *Clouds*.[144] For Strauss, Xenophon's 'Socratic discourse is a response to the Socratic comedy, a response not altogether without comical traits'.[145] In another work, Strauss wrote that 'comedy itself is the most effective disguise of wisdom',[146] which also suggests that he saw comedy as a natural genre for an esoteric writer. In addition, Strauss believed that Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates was an accurate portrayal of Socrates' youth[147] – thus Xenophon's rebuttal would be a way of correcting the earlier comedy in showing that the mature Socrates had a positive effect on society in contrast to his younger self.

In Strauss's view, Xenophon was not completely critical of the life of the perfect gentleman; however, gentlemanly virtue was inferior to genuine virtue which did not 'presuppose the possession of considerable wealth'. Nonetheless, Strauss's Socrates was impressed by Ischomachos' noble use of his wealth to help his friends and adorn the city – activities which Socrates recognized would be a burden to him. But Socrates was 'more concerned with lucre than with perfect gentlemanship'.[148] Thus, Xenophon had written an exoteric, socially useful text suggesting that Ischomachos' frugal and hard-working life is good; but there was an underlying esoteric message beneath which gently undercut the praise of that life to the careful reader, signifying that gentlemen were worthy but nevertheless inferior to philosophers.

As should now be clear, Strauss's Xenophon was not the bluff, moralizing old soldier commonly portrayed, but instead a master of irony and esotericism. The *Oeconomicus* was a comic riposte to Aristophanes' negative portrayal of Socrates on two levels. In its exoteric

reading, Socrates was socially useful in encouraging traditional gentlemanly virtues in his youthful, frivolous acquaintances. Rather than turning aristocratic youths against the city, he encouraged them to live orderly, frugal and productive lives. But to a careful reader, the esoteric reading gently mocked that life, demonstrating the real superiority of the philosopher's life over that of the gentleman. Strauss also credited Xenophon with extreme foresight in this dialogue, suggesting that the *Oeconomicus* was an example of Xenophon experimenting 'with extreme probabilities'. In this case, Xenophon's portrayal of Ischomachos was a depiction of modern liberal economics (a 'nascent or even merely divined bourgeois society').[149] Thus, the text is an exoteric encouragement to a feckless youth to work hard at farming, a description of bourgeois capitalist values and a subtle philosophical critique of these two themes, demonstrating instead the superiority of the philosophic life to both.

Is Strauss's interpretation tenable? He made some interesting and sophisticated points, such as the parallels drawn with *Clouds* and the parodic reading of Ischomachos. One can also see why such 'secret' readings, providing fresh relevance to contemporary society (however anachronistic) could appear exciting. And Strauss's interpretation has more support now than it did at the time he made it. Since his death, Classicists' readings of Xenophon as a more sophisticated and ironic writer have grown in number.[150] Many of these writers have focused on the same inconsistencies that Strauss found within the text, although there has been a tendency for such writers to distance themselves from any hint of 'Straussianism'.[151]

Ultimately, Strauss's interpretations at the highest level often seem implausible. If Plato's *Republic* was really intended as a warning against utopian thinking, then it was a warning that was missed by virtually every reader until Strauss – including Aristotle, who took its suggestions seriously enough to argue against them.[152] We may also be sceptical of the idea that Xenophon found the life of an estate manager to be problematic, bearing in mind his years as a country gentleman and the idyllic description he left of his own estate.[153] Nonetheless, Strauss did uncover previously hidden layers to ancient writers like Xenophon (even if some of the ultimate interpretations of what those layers meant appear far-fetched). Gray has agreed with Strauss that Xenophon used irony to a greater extent than has usually been accepted; but for her,

Xenophon's irony was most usually rhetorical rather than subversive. It was utilized to support arguments being made explicitly, rather than to undermine them.[154] Strauss may have been correct that Xenophon was a more profound thinker than he had until then been given credit for, but this does not necessarily mean that his profundity consisted of a separate reading at odds with the surface appearance.

Back to Conservatism

We must finally return to the issue of Strauss's place within the contemporary conservative movement. When asked for his opinions on Strauss, Voegelin was particularly critical of attempts to turn Strauss's scholarly achievements into support for a conservative political agenda. In 1977, for example, he wrote to John P. East, in response to East's characterization of Strauss as a conservative:

> I am not quite happy about it. For Strauss, after all, did not [do] the work he did, in order to extend comfort to Conservatives. He was a great scholar; and by the influence on his students he was instrumental in restoring a certain amount of serious scholarship to a field as sadly lacking in it as is political science[155]

Nonetheless, if Voegelin had been unhappy with East's claiming of Strauss's work for conservatism, he was even more scathing when East wanted to appropriate Voegelin for the movement. East was preparing a book on conservative thinkers which included a chapter on Voegelin. Voegelin described the article as a satire which had failed,

> to confront the actual content and purpose of my work, which has nothing to do with conservative predilections, with these predilections as illustrated by your selection of quotations[156]

Despite his protestations, Voegelin had a greater public impact than Strauss when their works were published in the 1950s. For instance, *Time* magazine devoted a five-page review to *The New Science of Politics* in 1953. Willmoore Kendall cited both Voegelin and Strauss as the key influences on his development in the 1950s and Brent Bozell, at a 1962 'Young Americans for Freedom' rally, was 'already making "Gnosticism"

the centrepiece of his indictment of the current American culture'.[157] A light-hearted way for young Republicans to exhibit their intellectual seriousness was to wear lapel badges carrying a motto inspired by Voegelin's dense prose: "Don't Immanentize the Eschaton!"'. Russell Kirk described Voegelin's work as 'an immense refutation of the *doxa* of the eighteenth-century rationalists, the nineteenth-century positivists, and the twentieth-century ideologues'.[158]

Strauss did exert some influence on conservatives of the 1950s and 1960s. William Buckley stated in 1971 that Strauss had been 'absolutely critical' to the conservative movement. Strauss had taught conservatives that 'scientific approaches to epistemology' were 'terribly misleading' and that there was a 'relationship between common sense and natural law'.[159] But he wrote little to indicate his stance on contemporary politics. One telling indication of Strauss's sympathies was that he subscribed to *National Review*, the beacon for traditionalist conservatives in the 1950s. In a letter to the editor, Strauss wrote that 'for some time I have been receiving *National Review*, and I agree with many articles appearing in the journal'. At this period, conservatism was not associated with defence of Israel and Strauss felt the need to point out how support for Israel should actually be a conservative viewpoint. In his view, political Zionism had been a 'moral force in an era of complete dissolution. It helped to stem the tide of "progressive" levelling of venerable, ancestral differences; it fulfilled a conservative function'. In the battle between East and West, Israel was 'the only country which as a country is an outpost of the West in the East'.[160] And according to Rosen, Strauss often revealed his political preferences in private; 'he supported Nixon. He was not at all critical of Joe McCarthy' but 'he saw conservatism as the true liberalism' and he was 'really a liberal democrat'.[161]

Regardless of Strauss's attitudes to contemporary politics, there was a conservative turn to Antiquity for its immortal truths in the 1950s, and this search was 'powerfully assisted by the work of Leo Strauss and his disciples'.[162] To Strauss, classical philosophy was an 'attempt to articulate what was formerly also called the "natural" character of classical thought [. . .] understood in contradistinction to what is merely human'. But, according to Strauss, 'nature' was anti-conservative; 'a human being is said to be natural if he is guided by nature rather than by convention, or by inherited opinion, or by tradition, to say nothing of

mere whims'.[163] In this respect then, Strauss was anti-conservative in the traditionalist sense, because his political philosophy was based around nature in contrast to convention.

In the 1950s and 1960s clash between traditionalist conservatives, like Kirk and Weaver, and classical liberal followers of Hayek, such as Meyer, Strauss was adopted predominantly by traditionalists because of his emphasis on public virtue over liberty (though in the 1980s there would be a split between Straussian neoconservatives and traditionalists, who argued that Straussianism was un-conservative and un-American).[164] Walter Berns, a student of Strauss's, wrote a critique of the Supreme Court which asserted that the Court's function was to conform to justice and inculcate virtue, not freedom.[165] This book was criticized by Meyer in *National Review*, and Meyer also decried the Straussian veneration of Plato. As we saw in Chapter 1, by 1962 Meyer had fully adopted the Popperian critique of Plato as a proto-totalitarian, and he had criticized Straussians for going back to the Greeks. According to Meyer, America's founding emphasis on Lockean rights was a view which Straussians believed, incorrectly, 'to be a massive error'.[166]

The reason Strauss was adopted predominantly by traditionalist conservatives was that, although beginning from very different first principles, the political implications of his ideas were in practice similar to theirs. According to Burnyeat, the essence of Straussian political teaching was that a truly just society was so improbable that gentlemen should rule conservatively to prevent an endless round of revolutions.[167] So, although Strauss's version of 'natural law' might have been very radical (or reactionary) if put into practice (e.g. in overturning the American 'rights' tradition), his reading of Plato as anti-utopian essentially made for a politics of stability over change – a moderate, conservative outcome.

As we have seen, the Right's relationships with Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss have been complex. Voegelin, who did not wish to be painted as a conservative, nonetheless fits more snugly into the conservative mould than Strauss. His overtly Christian interpretation of history gelled better with contemporaries and his historicism was almost Burkean. Despite this, after a flurry of interest in the 1950s, Voegelin's star waned. Strauss should be a much more problematic figure for the modern conservative movement; his critique of historicism was also a critique of Burkean,

traditionalist conservatism; his focus on the unbridgeable gap between reason and revelation, and his own apparent atheism, should make his work deeply suspect to the Christian Right; and his critique of liberalism, regardless of changes in the meaning of 'liberal' to modern Americans, was also a critique of the Lockean philosophy which guided America's revered Founding Fathers. However, Straussianism is elusive and, in ways that some would call deceitful, flexible. What critics view as manipulation of religious credibility, Straussians frame instead as 'respect' for religious opinion. Belief in natural law can sound like belief in liberal natural rights, and the very criticism of Burkean historicism, as an argument in favour of absolute truths, can also be framed as an argument supportive of religious truth.

Strauss's interpretations of Greek thought are also elusive; sometimes the clearest conclusions stretch credibility whilst at other points his 'analysis' consisted entirely of endlessly drawn out, obscure, exasperating fence-sitting. We might fruitfully return at this point to the question of why Strauss chose to focus so much on Xenophon's portrayal of Socrates in his final years. One possibility, suggested by his discussion of Xenophon's contemporary unpopularity, was that Strauss was drawn to Xenophon because he was then understudied: the somewhat banal reason that Strauss focused on Xenophon because in doing so he would be contributing to a much less crowded field than, say, the one containing Plato. But this does not seem to fit Strauss's work. Anybody so keen to 'make a mark' would surely have made more effort to write in a style which would make his work approachable to other academics. A more plausible possibility is that Xenophon fitted Strauss's idea of how an esoteric writer should write much better than did Plato. As we have seen, Strauss expected an esoteric writer to write conventional truths in a dull, plodding prose designed to conceal the few, rare gems of exciting esoteric truth. Xenophon could perhaps at times be described as plodding, particularly in his dialogues, whereas Plato certainly could not. Furthermore, esoteric writers make intentional mistakes, such as contradicting themselves or using obviously poor logic, in order to send messages to careful readers. Again, Xenophon looks a better candidate on this score than Plato.

Esoteric writers also hid their commitment to the harsh truth behind a wall of conventional platitudes. But Plato's dialogues had the surface appearance of just such a sceptical search for the truth – so what was

hidden, if anything, could only be a slightly different search for the truth, or a search which gave clues to the eventual answers. Plato might be an esoteric writer on such a reading, but not an esoteric writer in the Straussian mould. It is interesting that the two Platonic dialogues that Strauss did significant work on, *Laws* and *Republic*, were just those two in which the main figures were at their most didactic and in which the dialogues end without apparent *aporia* (a philosophical impasse). Xenophon appears to be a more conventional moralist (and so a better candidate, from Strauss's point of view, for being an esoteric writer). Finally, and for our investigation of the relationship between Greek thought and American political thought the most significant reason, Xenophon's writings lend themselves much better to an activist political philosophy. Xenophon's own biography showed him engaged in political and military affairs, and his life and works seemed to show greater partiality towards 'gentlemen' than Plato's did. This is not to say that Strauss used Xenophon to argue that philosophers needed to engage in politics, which is what his detractors most often suggest, but Strauss did argue, with much nuance, that Xenophon's Socrates considered this a worthy alternative.

If Strauss's task was to comment on the 'eternal problems' considered by the great thinkers, then the dilemma faced by philosophers – whether to engage in public life – was one such problem. According to Strauss's student Harry Jaffa, Strauss 'liked to point out that Xenophon, the pupil of Socrates, could rule both gentlemen and non-gentlemen'.[168] Strauss himself did not explicitly recommend either option, but this issue was fundamental to the split between his followers explored in the next chapter – at least some of Strauss's followers used his Xenophon as a model of the politically engaged philosopher. Ultimately, some of Strauss's interpretations seem implausible. Nonetheless, he did uncover previously hidden layers to ancient writers like Xenophon. So we may be convinced by Strauss that Xenophon was a more profound thinker than he has often been given credit for, whilst remaining unconvinced that Xenophon's profundity was entirely at odds with the surface appearance of his works.

Voegelin was a historicist and the particular Hellenic genius of his Plato could not fully transcend the classical period; but, with his anti-historicist attitude, it is unsurprising that Strauss did not rhapsodize about ancient Greece in the way that Voegelin and Weaver did.

Nonetheless, his writings give hints suggesting some idealization of Athens. In writing that the 'obvious possibility is overlooked that the situation to which one particular doctrine is related, is particularly favourable to the discovery of the truth', Strauss hinted that classical Athens was such a place, 'favourable to the discovery of the truth'. Similarly, he contended that classical philosophy offered unique insights to the human condition precisely because it was the original political philosophy. The philosophy of Plato was 'non-traditional because it belongs to the fertile moment when all political traditions were shaken, and there was not yet in existence a tradition of political philosophy'.[169] Thus Strauss privileged Athenian thought as uniquely insightful. And, in using the ancient 'Athens versus Jerusalem' dichotomy in his works on the 'theologico-political problem', he helped to ensure that Athens would retain a prominent position for succeeding generations of Straussians as *the* symbol of reason.

CHAPTER 3

RISE OF THE NEOCONSERVATIVES

A neoconservative is a liberal who has been mugged by reality.
Irving Kristol[1]

This chapter examines neoconservative thought, which emerged during the 1960s. In particular, it looks at how that thought engaged with Aristotle. In the view of many commentators, as we saw in Chapter 2, 'neoconservatism is the legacy of Leo Strauss'.[2] This chapter will argue instead that, although Straussian interpretations of Antiquity were important for some neoconservatives, his impact on their development as a whole has been exaggerated. In fact, neoconservative social scientists maintained their existing social scientific methodologies (which, as Chapter 2 showed, were heavily criticized by Strauss), but supplemented them with a turn to Aristotle which occurred largely independently of Straussian influence. As they became disillusioned with the value-free approach of Weber, Aristotle seemed to offer them a pragmatic, non-religious defence of conventional virtue. Nonetheless, neoconservatives often found themselves in agreement with Straussian political scientists, and as the years passed the two groups became almost indistinguishable on policy issues.

Neoconservatism

After Taft's death and the implosion of McCarthyism, Barry Goldwater (1909–98) became the most prominent politician on the conservative

Right. He had only entered the Senate in 1952, but his outspoken criticism of Eisenhower quickly won supporters among the New Conservatives and he was talked about as a contender for the 1960 presidential election. He lent his name to *The Conscience of a Conservative*,[3] which made a case for all the policies – rollback of communism, farm subsidy elimination, lower taxes, a smaller government role in education and housing, and a negligible role for the federal government in the fight for civil rights – favoured by the *National Review* conservatives. This was unsurprising since it was written by one of the founders of *National Review*, Brent Bozell. Goldwater lost the 1960 nomination to Richard Nixon, but the conservative wing had gained the upper hand by 1964, when Goldwater became the Republican presidential nominee after a bitter struggle with the party's moderate wing. His acceptance speech became infamous for the lines, 'Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you that moderation in the pursuit of virtue is no virtue.' These lines, supposedly an allusion to an argument in Cicero, did significant harm to Goldwater's campaign and seemed to confirm the Democrat narrative that he was a dangerous extremist. He also made little effort to tailor his message to win the election. Partly due to his poor campaign and partly due to the post-Kennedy assassination bump for the Democrats, Goldwater lost in a landslide to Lyndon Johnson.

Notwithstanding contemporary predictions that Goldwater's defeat would herald the disappearance of the Republicans' conservative wing, it continued to grow in strength. According to James Hijiya, the 1960s Right focused on building long-term organizations. Conservatives, using groups like Young Americans for Freedom (1960) and the American Conservative Union (1964), sought to infiltrate and take over local organizations, then state bodies and eventually the national Republican Party, taking it further to the right.[4] Following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights and the 1965 Voting Rights Acts, which outlawed legal segregation by the states, more blacks began to vote Democrat and more white southerners began to vote Republican, turning previously Democrat states Republican and vice versa. Beginning at Berkeley in 1964, American university campuses saw a wave of unrest over a range of issues, including race and the ongoing impasse in Vietnam, as well as more prosaic matters such as curfews, demands for 'more relevant courses', an end to grading students, and the right of students to grade professors. Conservatives predictably

disapproved of the student protesters, although some, like Buckley, tended to blame the 'intellectual and moral abdication of their faculty'.[5]

The starting point for neoconservatism is usually considered the founding of *Public Interest* in 1965 by Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol. Both founders, and most of the contributors, still voted for the Democrats and considered the Left their home, but the contrarian approach of the magazine increasingly put them at odds with left-wing orthodoxy. Regular contributors tended to be social science academics with government ties, such as James Q. Wilson, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nathan Glazer, and Seymour Lipset, though not all eventually became neoconservatives. These intellectuals grew increasingly concerned at the unintended consequences of state-organized poverty-alleviation programmes as the 1960s progressed. Though initially a term of abuse, 'neoconservative' became their accepted designation by the end of the 1970s. The two most well-known neoconservative intellectuals by the early 1970s were Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz. Both had grown disillusioned with the Democratic Party and the Left more generally, because of its support for a larger welfare state, affirmative action and what they considered a weak Cold War stance. The neoconservatives as a group were taken more seriously than existing conservatives by intellectuals. According to Diana Trilling, the defining moment for the movement came when Kristol convinced a number of prominent, previously left-wing, thinkers to endorse Richard Nixon over George McGovern in a 1972 advertisement in the *New York Times*. The signatories on Kristol's pro-Nixon advertisement included existing thinkers of the Right such as Leo Strauss and the free-market economist Milton Friedman, as well as neoconservatives such as Robert Nisbet and Gertrude Himmelfarb, who will be discussed later. At the same time Norman Podhoretz, as editor of *Commentary* magazine, took the previously left-wing journal rightwards.

One key organizational change for conservatives in the 1970s was the increase in the number of and funding for right-wing think-tanks. There had been prominent left-leaning think-tanks for a number of years, but only in the 1970s did right-wing think-tanks become important both for developing policy ideas and in campaigning for their adoption. The Heritage Foundation was founded in 1973 and by the end of the 1970s there was also the Manhattan Institute, the Shavano Institute, the Center

for Public Choice, the Center for Judicial Studies, the Richard Mellon Scaife Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the National Institute for Public Policy. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI), founded in 1938, gained much greater influence in the 1970s after being reorganized and expanded, and the AEI's experts advised both the Nixon and Ford administrations. Receiving funding from new foundations funded by wealthy supporters, these institutions became essential incubators of conservative policy ideas. These new and expanded research institutes also provided work to neoconservatives who were no longer welcome at the liberal institutions which had previously employed them. Irving Kristol joined the AEI in 1977 and other prominent neoconservatives followed shortly after.

Kristol, expanding upon the pithier definition quoted at the beginning of this chapter, argued that neoconservatism originated in the disillusionment of a fairly small group of liberal intellectuals who moved 'toward a more conservative point of view: conservative, but different in important respects from the traditional conservatism of the Republican Party'. They initially described themselves as 'dissident liberals' who disagreed with other liberals about the 'Great Society'. However, it was the rise of the more radical New Left in the 1960s, particularly its takeover of universities, which made their 'dissidence accelerate into a barely disguised hostility'.[6] Kristol highlighted a number of the distinctive features of neoconservative thought. Firstly, neoconservatism was 'a current of thought emerging out of the academic–intellectual world and provoked by disillusionment with contemporary liberalism'. To Kristol, it was different from former movements of disillusioned groups like the Southern Agrarians because it was 'antiromantic'. He posited the philosophical origins of neoconservatism in 'classical – that is premodern, pre-ideological – political philosophy', and here he singled out Leo Strauss for being 'important', despite being 'somewhat too wary of modernity'. Neoconservatives were more enthusiastic about the 'bourgeois society' than the Old or New Right, and they favoured a predominantly market-based economy because economic growth assisted social stability. They disagreed with libertarians like Friedman and Hayek on the most desirable extent of government, and favoured a significant welfare state that could be used to 'elevate' people by shaping their preferences towards conservative goals. Finally, neoconservatives

'look upon family and religion as indispensable pillars of a decent society'.[7]

Robert Nisbet argued that the neoconservatives of the 1970s and the New Conservatives of the 1950s had 'important likenesses', including 'a full blown antipathy to the New Left and to the 'establishment' liberalism of the Galbraiths and Schlesingers, the Kennedys and McGoverns'. In both groups there was a greater fear of Soviet communism and 'a disposition to counter-attack', a preference for localism and regionalism, distrust of centralization, and a novel respect for the judiciary and Congress as counter-balances to the Presidency. For Nisbet, the main differences were the New Conservatives' greater interest in religious objectives and the neoconservatives' greater respect for the aims of the welfare state (reform rather than abolition). However, since as early as 1980 the media have often used conservative and neoconservative interchangeably.[8] One difference between neoconservatives and their predecessors on the Right was that neoconservatives believed equality of condition was a worthwhile goal, even if ultimately unattainable. Secondly, whereas conservatives had made little effort to reach beyond their existing constituency, the neoconservatives aimed publications at the Left (e.g. the *National Interest* and *Public Interest*) and so did more to broaden movement.

Irving Kristol

The life and writings of Irving Kristol are a good place to begin a study of neoconservatism. Numerous commentators have observed his influential role within the movement. He was 'from the start the leading figure of the neoconservatives'.[9] To give but one example of his wider influence, Jack Kemp, the US congressman who later helped to convert Ronald Reagan to supply-side economics, credited Irving Kristol as a key inspiration for his own views. Besides his undoubtedly influential role, Kristol also left numerous writings, including a number of works examining what it meant to be a neoconservative. According to Drury, Kristol was emblematic of neoconservatism: 'the themes that preoccupy him are the dominant themes of the American Right, because his neoconservatism has become the dominant ideology of the Republican Party in the 1980s and 1990s, and because it constitutes a most serious challenge to American liberalism'.[10] However, we should be careful

not to overstate his role or to posit him as a model followed by all neoconservatives. Drury has used Kristol to show the influence of Leo Strauss on American conservatism, but few other early members of the movement cited Strauss more than fleetingly.

Adam Fuller[11] has more accurately described the view that neoconservatives as a group were adherents of Strauss a 'misconception', arguing that only Kristol of the six key names from the 1970s were influenced by Strauss (the other five were Norman Podhoretz, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Gertrude Himmelfarb and Midge Decter) – though actually Himmelfarb (Kristol's wife) wrote on Strauss too, and many other neoconservatives of the next generation (such as William Kristol) or lower down the scale of importance (Werner Dannhauser, Walter Berns, Allan Bloom, Harry Jaffa and so on) were either taught by Strauss or by his students. In spite of what he wrote about the negligible influence of Strauss, Fuller went on to argue that 'at the core of the neoconservative disposition is a Platonism and anti-Machiavellianism that always remained part and parcel of their idea of the good life'. Even if Kristol was not pulling all the strings of the American Right, and even if his approach to Leo Strauss and ancient thought was a distinctive rather than common strand in neoconservative thought, he was still an important figure and his writings are important for understanding the reception of Greek thought on the American Right.

Kristol had been a Trotskyist in the 1930s, but by the 1950s he self-identified as a Cold War liberal. He had attended City College of New York before World War II and spent some time attending lectures at the University of Chicago after the war whilst his wife, historian and fellow neoconservative Gertrude Himmelfarb, completed a doctorate. The pair then spent some time in England whilst Himmelfarb undertook post-doctoral research in Cambridge. Upon his return to America, Kristol began working for *Commentary*, then still a predominantly left-wing magazine. With Daniel Bell he founded *The Public Interest* in 1965 and he went on to become a prominent voice on the Right, a Republican, and a friend of William Buckley's. As we have seen, the standard narrative posits that the neoconservatives were left-wing intellectuals who shifted right in the 1960s, but this is not the full story. Kristol had always been a sometimes discordant figure on the Left, and showed hints of his future trajectory as far back as the early 1950s. His very first political article in *Commentary* was a 1952 piece which criticized McCarthy but, more

controversially on the Left, also attacked McCarthy's critics. Himmelfarb had introduced Strauss's work to a wider audience through a positive review of *On Tyranny* in *Commentary*, calling Strauss 'perhaps the wisest and most penetrating among contemporary political philosophers'.[12] And Kristol himself had reviewed *Persecution and the Art of Writing* for *Commentary* in 1952. When he wrote an article on Machiavelli's 'profanation' of politics, first published in 1961, he cited Strauss as the 'best' authority on Machiavelli.[13]

Even as a Trotskyist at college, Kristol had studied Plato and been 'persuaded that it made sense for a suprasensible universe of ideas to exist'. However, he wrote that 'the two thinkers who had the greatest subsequent impact on my thinking were Lionel Trilling in the 1940s and Leo Strauss in the 1950s'. According to Kristol, 'encountering Leo Strauss's work produced the kind of intellectual shock that is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. He turned one's intellectual universe upside down'. Strauss 'trained his students to look at modernity through the eyes of the "ancients" and the premoderns, accepting the premise that they were wiser and more insightful than we are'. Kristol also made a point of emphasizing Strauss's ideas on esotericism, without stating explicitly whether he agreed or disagreed with them.[14]

In 'Utopianism, Ancient and Modern', Kristol cited Strauss for confirmation that Plato's *Republic* was not supposed to be realized physically, which was 'the basic attitude of all classical, premodern utopian thinking'. In contrast with modern utopians, who thought their perfect societies were achievable, 'the ancients tell us that to demand a perfect society in the foreseeable future is to be mad, while to expect a perfect society to exist at all, at any time, is to be utopian'. Modernity had confused 'words with deeds, philosophical dreams with the substantial actualities of human existence' … but 'the ancients anticipated that from such a confusion only disaster could result'.[15] Kristol often credited Strauss's writings for highlighting the weaknesses of liberalism and claimed that these writings, as well as those of his students, had 'altered the very tone of public discourse in the United States' and brought 'contemporary liberalism into disrepute – its simplistic views of human nature, its utopian social philosophy, its secularist animus against religion'.[16]

Like Strauss's Plato, Kristol saw equality as a noble but unachievable goal. However, Kristol turned to Aristotle for support. He argued that

'a just and legitimate society, according to Aristotle, is one in which inequalities – of property, or station, or power – are generally perceived by the citizenry as necessary for the common good'. Kristol also turned to Aristotle when discussing the 'best' regime: Aristotle 'recognized that his own view of the "best" regime was of a primarily speculative nature – that is to say, a view always worth holding in mind but usually not relevant to the contingent circumstances [...] within which actual statesmen have to operate'.[17] Kristol shared with the Straussians a distrust of liberalism, so he needed to portray the Founding Fathers as something other than liberals if he wanted to see America as 'good'. Thus to fully understand the American Revolution, it was necessary to look beyond its rhetoric and instead focus upon 'the kinds of political activity the Revolution unleashed'. Their rhetoric may have been liberal, but their actions suggested that the Founders were motivated by an older virtue. Kristol asserted that state constitutions were not radical at all, but usually mildly revised versions of existing state charters from the colonial period. The major changes undertaken were aimed at weakening the central government; none of the changes attempted to change the 'traditional system of local self-government'. Accordingly, 'the purpose of this Revolution was to bring our political institutions into a more perfect correspondence with an actual "American way of life"'.[18]

For Kristol, the Founding Fathers had been reluctant revolutionaries fighting to preserve their way of life rather than to create a radically new form of society. Perhaps drawing upon Voegelin's theory of Gnosticism, Kristol maintained that the American Revolution was unlike other revolutions because those other revolutions, despite their atheistic origins, were 'essentially a religious phenomenon, seized with the perennial promise of redemption'. Accordingly, the French Revolution and all subsequent revolutions made impossible promises, such as the abolition of poverty or the achievement of mass happiness, whereas America's only promised not to impede the pursuit of happiness. Thus the American system was supposed to be a hybrid of both republican and democratic systems, and modern Americans were in danger of forgetting the republican aspects in seeking ever more democracy.[19] This is an example of Kristol re-moulding the past to make a contemporary argument: the neoconservatives, in resisting the demands of the New Left in favour of the status quo, could be accused of going against the

American spirit of revolution. This meant that the American revolutionaries had to be made into conservatives too.

In an interview for the *Esquire* issue on neoconservatism, Kristol claimed that neoconservatism was all about Aristotelian 'prudence': 'when you apply the prudential view to politics, you see that the job of government is not to shape society according to some design of perfection but to cope. The business of government is coping.' This was a Straussian call for moderation, as was Kristol's claim to have 'rediscovered the ancients and taken sides with Aristotle, who thought that prudence was the principal virtue of action'.[20] It is noticeable that the 1972 *New York Times* advertisement taken out by the neoconservatives praised Nixon for his 'superior capacity for prudent and responsible leadership'.[21]

It is also possible to see the influence of Strauss in Kristol's attitude to religion. Kristol had claimed that only neoconservatives could really utilize the Religious Right. 'The intellectual class in the United States is so violently opposed to religious conservatism that the presence of even a relatively small number of friendly neoconservatives makes a difference'. However, many neoconservatives were 'not religiously observant in their private lives', which had led to accusations of hypocrisy. For Kristol, this missed the point: 'all political philosophers prior to the twentieth century, regardless of their personal piety or lack thereof, understood the importance of religion in the life of the political community. Neoconservatives, because of their interest in and attachment to classical (as distinct from contemporary) political philosophy, share this understanding.' Likewise, 'modern secularism has such affinities to moral nihilism that even those who wish simply to affirm or reaffirm moral values have little choice but to seek a grounding for such values in a religious tradition.'[22]

Kristol's early distrust of libertarianism was evident in an article first published in 1971, in which he made a determined argument in favour of censorship in certain circumstances. His concern was that obscenity and pornography, in being protected under America's right to free speech, would 'brutalize and debase our citizenry', suggesting that it was not about one film or book but about a 'general tendency that is suffusing our entire culture'. According to Kristol, 'if you care for the quality of life in our American democracy, then you will be for censorship'.[23] Similarly Kristol ended a book on capitalism by arguing that it was necessary to travel back to premodern political philosophy, including Plato and Aristotle, to counteract 'spiritually impoverished'

modernity.[24] Kristol gave capitalism only 'two cheers' because he was sceptical of the ability of capitalism to support the bonds that kept society together. Kristol seemed to follow Bell in arguing that 'capitalism and modern secular society encourage a rationalist way of looking at the world that renders incredible any notion of an afterlife, or of a supernatural redress of experienced injustice'.[25] Thus capitalism undermined the culture and religion which sustain it. We see here the debt to Bell but also the Straussian concern with maintaining a public religious orthodoxy for the good of society.

The theme of liberal utopianism versus conservative realism recurred throughout Kristol's writings and was one of his prime debts to Greek thought. The influence of Strauss's interpretation of Antiquity – the call for a return to the ancients, the favouring of censorship, distrust of liberalism and, fundamentally, the opposition to any form of utopianism – permeated Kristol's thought. As can be seen from the lack of detailed citations of ancient authors in his work, Antiquity's influence on Kristol was somewhat generic in nature. Nevertheless, references to Greece were not mere window-dressing, since the themes drawn from Strauss's engagement with Greek thought dominated his thinking. Kristol was an intellectual popularizer, in whose work detailed citations and close textual analysis would be out of place. We see in Kristol's reception of Antiquity a stage in the transmission of classical ideas from the specifics of academia to an engaged public intellectual – and subsequently to think-tank policy papers with no explicit classical allusions at all.

Neoconservative Thinkers and the Avoidance of Antiquity

On any list of important neoconservative thinkers, Norman Podhoretz (born 1930) will be prominent. He succeeded Kristol as editor of *Commentary* from 1960 and he initially moved the magazine further left in the early 1960s. Following Israel's victory in the 1967 War, many on the Left began to turn against Israel and this pushed Podhoretz rightwards. However, not all of the early neoconservatives littered their works with classical allusions. The problem with Podhoretz for our present purposes is that he had almost nothing to say on Strauss, and neither did his writings betray any evidence of engagement with Greek thought. Podhoretz and Kristol could better be described as polemicists, but neoconservatism also spawned a group of social scientists who have

been influential in US policy making over the last 30 years. As we saw in Chapter 2, Strauss's critique of contemporary social science was a large part of his indictment of modernity, so we might expect to have seen Straussian social scientists playing a key role in neoconservatism. This was not really the case though.

Nathan Glazer (born 1923) was also concerned about the detrimental effects of government welfare programmes on public virtue. He had been a sociologist in the Kennedy administration's Housing and Home Finance Agency and he also worked for the Johnson administration, where he had initially been supportive of the 'Great Society' agenda. According to Glazer, his turn to neoconservatism developed out of the insight that policy makers appeared to create as many problems as they solved.[26] He concluded from the failures of the 1960s that social policy was usually the effort to deal with the breakdown of traditional support mechanisms (such as the family). However, social policy tended to break those traditional mechanisms down further, requiring more social action, which damaged traditional bonds still further and so on. Glazer had attended Leo Strauss's lectures at the New School for Social Research in New York in the 1940s, but Glazer's disillusionment with the tools of social policy did not make him turn to the ancients. Likewise, Edward C. Banfield (1916–1999), who coined a new term in his examination of the 'underclass' in *The Unheavenly City*,[27] did not call upon the Greeks for support. His emphasis on the moral dimensions of social problems was highly influential within neoconservative social science, and partly explains why other neoconservative social scientists turned to classical Greek thought to buttress their arguments, but Banfield himself did not.

Again, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927–2003) was a Harvard sociologist who served in the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford administrations, and later became a senator (still as a Democrat). Moynihan wrote a report for the Johnson administration arguing that black family breakdown and absent fathers had created a 'tangle of pathologies' which required government actions; however, the report was poorly received by many on the Left when it was leaked. He was one of the few neoconservative social scientists who engaged seriously with Leo Strauss. According to Moynihan, Strauss's followers were 'far more influential than [is] generally known (possibly because they were so few

in number)'. He acknowledged his own debt to Strauss in passing, writing that when giving a foreign policy speech in the 1970s 'it had come to me that Strauss's idea of the collapse of the "Modern Project" [...] was a considerably more profound way to describe the crisis of democracy that occurred later in the twentieth century than the standard explanations of the moment'.[28] Nonetheless, if he agreed with Strauss in holding a preference for the ancients against the moderns, there was little evidence of it in his work. Like Glazer and Banfield, Moynihan did not acknowledge or examine a relationship to the ancients in his writings.

Perhaps the most influential neoconservative social scientist was Daniel Bell (1919–2011). Bell had been a friend of Kristol's since their student days in the 1930s and they jointly founded *Public Interest* in 1965. Bell was never comfortable with the neoconservative label and maintained views throughout that were at odds with those of other neoconservatives. Whilst he claimed to be a 'conservative in culture', he considered himself 'a socialist in economics'.[29] In fact, Bell contended that capitalism and cultural conservatism were incompatible, arguing in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* that the capitalist, inquisitive spirit undermined respect for tradition. According to Bell, following Weber's *The Protestant Work Ethic*, capitalism grew out of and was nurtured by protestant cultures, which emphasized frugality, hard work and self-reliance. But as capitalism evolved it demanded ever-greater levels of consumption which undermined just those cultural characteristics.[30]

Bell had wanted to be a sociologist from an early age, but he actually majored in ancient history on the advice of the ancient historian Moses Finley (then Finkelstein), who suggested that it was the best preparation for sociology because it was possible to study entire and coherent cultures. As Bell explained in an interview:

> I had a teacher named Moses Finkelstein, very brilliant young man, only a few years older than I. And he said, 'Look, you want to know about the world? You want to become a sociologist? Learn ancient history.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'Look, you can either study anthropology or you can study ancient history, which is the antecedent to what comes up here. You can also see them as relatively homogenous cultures, the Egyptian culture, ancient

> Greek, Roman culture, and therefore you will get a sense both of different social structures as well as western history.' He says, 'If you read anthropology, what will you read?' For example, I read a book by John Whiting, who later was a colleague here, called *Becoming a Kwoma*, which was a small tribal study. And I said, 'What else would he bekwoma?' So through the influence of Moses Finkelstein I studied ancient history.[31]

Despite this ancient history background and a shared belief with the Straussians that religion was socially useful[32] there were very few close engagements with Greek thought evidenced in his work. For instance, in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, which astutely recognized the economic shift taking place in developed economies from manufacturing to services and information-related work, Bell cited Aristotle just once, in an approving footnote referencing a section of the *Politics* (1317b) in which Aristotle had suggested that a state should not pursue one kind of equality exclusively (equality based on merit or equality of result).[33] Likewise, when *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* was published in book form, it contained 19 brief references to Aristotle; however, the original article on which it was based contained none, perhaps signifying that in Bell's work Greek thought was ornamental rather than vital.[34]

Neoconservative Thinkers and the Recourse to Antiquity

Nevertheless, as neoconservative sociologists became increasingly critical of Weber's fact–value distinction, many did begin searching for alternative intellectual forebears and, for some, the work of Aristotle seemed to offer a valuable model.

James Q. Wilson

James Q. Wilson (1931–2012) was another influential neoconservative sociologist, responsible for the 'broken windows' theory of policing (clamping down on minor examples of anti-social behaviour led to lower general crime rates and made people feel safer), which was adopted by the New York Police Department in the 1990s. Crime levels had remained fairly stable during the 1950s, but had increased by almost 20 per cent per year since the mid-60s. Wilson shared the general

neoconservative disillusionment with government, and his *Thinking about Crime*[35] began with an injunction against expecting too much. This pessimism about what could realistically be achieved through social policy pervaded neoconservative thinking in this period (though it was heavily at odds with the optimistic attitude to what governments could achieve abroad, expressed by the neoconservative foreign policy interventionists of the 1990s and 2000s). Such pessimism provided an affinity with Straussianism, even if it was not directly influenced by it (Wilson did obtain his PhD from Chicago in 1959, when Strauss was there, but there is no evidence that he was influenced by Strauss).

Wilson argued 'for a sober view of man and his institutions that would permit reasonable things to be accomplished, foolish things abandoned, and utopian things forgotten'. As an example, he suggested that a fractional reduction in crime would be a good goal and that this could be achieved quite straightforwardly by 'incapacitating a larger proportion of the convicted serious robbers' (which seemed to be the policy adopted in America, at least partly responsible for America having the highest rates of incarceration in the world today). He rejected existing approaches to crime, which had 'trifled with the wicked, made sport of the innocent, and encouraged the calculators' – suggesting that a better approach would be to lock away repeat offenders, spend more on rehabilitating the innocent (teenagers), and give bigger penalties to the calculators.[36]

In *The Moral Sense*, Wilson directly considered morality's role in sociology. According to Wilson, 'virtue has acquired a bad name' and he was seeking to 're-establish the possibility and the reasonableness of speaking frankly and convincingly about moral choices'.[37] There was only one small specific mention of Plato (a comment that Plato's moral theories were discredited when completely applied), but a number of references to Aristotle. The importance of morality in reaching judgements was 'widely held among philosophers' before the present, and Aristotle was cited as the archetypal philosopher for his assertion 'that man was naturally a social being who seeks happiness'.[38] This was partly window-dressing, giving one of Aristotle's most famous lines to make a fairly banal point. However, with Weber's fact–value distinction being such a fundamental aspect of what it was to 'do' sociology, Wilson no doubt felt that an appeal to another 'voice of authority' would buttress his claim to be undertaking sociology, and in moving sociology

back to what he felt to be a better direction, with his work on morality. Throughout the work Aristotle was used to make similar, seemingly straightforward points.

These arguments, cast in the guise of 'commonsense', were just those places where Wilson would be most open to attack from proponents of Weberian moral neutrality. At another point, he cited the *Nicomachean Ethics*,[39] writing that 'by equity I mean what Aristotle meant by distributive justice: 'what is just [. . .] is what is proportionate'.[40] But, we may well ask, who decides what is proportionate? Aristotle was used here as a form of evasion, to speak vaguely of morality as something obvious and commonsensical, without actually going into specifics which could be critiqued. Likewise, there was no need to examine the failure of Soviet communism because Aristotle had already given 'a crushing refutation' of common property ownership: hard workers resent shirkers being rewarded, people work harder to improve things they own, it is pleasant to do favours for friends and the pleasure of ownership is natural. Thus Aristotle confirmed that 'having and sharing are innate human sentiments'. And, again citing the *Nicomachean Ethics*,[41] Wilson maintained that 'Aristotle placed temperance high on his list of virtues'.[42] Aristotle was an authority who could be used to forestall the need for investigation. In this sense, Aristotle was paradoxically being used both because he theorized a virtue system based on human practice and at the same time because that virtue system was under-theorized. It was the fact that Aristotle's virtue system was both authoritative and, in places, simplistic, which made it so attractive.

Occasionally, Wilson did use the findings of modern sociology and the authority of Aristotle in tandem, but it was Aristotle's authority which confirmed modern evidence: 'these findings of modern personality theory would not have surprised Aristotle. Virtue, he said, is a state of character lying in the mean between two extremes; temperance lies in the mean between an excess of indulgence and a deficiency of pleasure.' And it was Aristotle who took Wilson from the modern finding to the conclusion: 'in Aristotle's language, most people become temperate as their natural sociability – a desire to please parents and friends – leads them to value the deferred pleasures (respect, friendship, the absence of punishment, lasting happiness) that come from subordinating their immoderate passions to modest habits'.[43] Thus Aristotle supported

Wilson's argument that morality boosts social capital and was an extension of social pressure (and so to lower crime and increase the productivity of its citizenry, governments needed to stop undermining the power of families, churches and communities). Nonetheless, even when people were beyond those pressures, Wilson argued that it was habit, not fear of religion, that made most people behave decently, and again Aristotle was mentioned in support – 'habituation, as Aristotle said, is the source of most of the moral virtues'.[44] We see here an example of how the neoconservatives were not as far away from their roots in the Left as is often supposed. Social pressure and habituation have been recognized by many left-wing social scientists as key factors influencing individual behaviour – though whereas they have tended to characterize such pressures negatively, as a form of repression, neoconservatives like Wilson saw them as glues binding society together.

Notwithstanding the thrust of the work, which ascribed such import to the structures of society, Wilson ended with a defence of natural rights. According to Wilson, 'we may disagree about what is natural, but we cannot escape the fact that we have a nature – that is, a set of traits and predispositions that set limits to what we may do and suggest guides to what we must do'. But he was arguing for a natural right based on an acknowledgement that 'there is no single moral principle, but several partially consistent ones, and that neither happiness nor virtue can be described by rule'. For Wilson, such a 'complete understanding of man's moral capacities' was 'stated by Aristotle in phrases that in most respects precisely anticipate the findings of modern science'. Despite such supposed precision, a 'proper understanding of human nature can rarely provide us with rules for action, but it can supply what Aristotle intended: a grasp of what is good in human life and a rough ranking of those goods'.[45]

Wilson cited the ancients more precisely than most conservative thinkers. The fact that Aristotle was brought in briefly and not analysed in detail may be partly due to the compressed and not fully-argued-out nature of Aristotle's work. Wilson seemed really to have been building a theory of non-theory – i.e. it was Aristotle's practical, under-theorized aspects that Wilson was attempting to theorize. As virtue equalled habituation, it did not really matter what virtue was.

Charles Murray

Charles Murray (born 1943) is another neoconservative who has emphasized the moral dimension in social analysis. Like other disillusioned neoconservatives, Murray believed that the Great Society programmes of Lyndon Johnson were not only unsuccessful in alleviating poverty, but actually made some problems worse. He shared Wilson's pessimism about government aid really helping the poor; but he also thought that there was also a moral problem with welfare which transcended its practical limitations. For Murray, 'it was wrong to take from the most industrious, most responsible poor – take safety, education, justice, status – so that we could cater to the least industrious, least responsible poor'.[46] Compared to other neoconservatives, he placed less emphasis on reworking government to be more efficient in achieving its goals (for example, through new policies like tax credits) and more emphasis on government as an obstacle that needed to be removed so that people could achieve their goals unhindered.

Like Glazer, Moynihan and Wilson, Murray's own experience informed his disillusionment with government. His experience was gained in the Peace Corps in 1960s Thailand, where he noticed that the interests of villagers did not match the development goals of the government. The more the government did to help them, the more the villagers complained that life was getting worse, and he realized after a while that the villagers were right (though he continued to think that modernization was a good thing). Modern social science had focused on measurable, quantifiable data, but ignored more difficult questions such as happiness and morality. He instead argued that 'the pursuit of happiness' was a better framework for guiding social policy than numerical data.[47] In spite of this explicit reference to the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence, he began his attempt to place less concrete qualities back into social science by appealing to the authority of Aristotle. Taking his definition from *Nicomachean Ethics*, Murray suggested that every activity 'has a good that is its own particular end'. One pursued all activities both for that particular end and for another: happiness, which was 'unique because it is the only good that we always choose as an end in itself and never for the sake of something else'.[48] Murray went on to paraphrase Aristotle: what sets man apart from other creatures was 'human intelligence', and he then gave a direct quotation:

'the proper function in man, then, consists in an activity of the soul in conformity with a rational principle or, at least, not without it'.[49]

Murray included a long discussion of Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom, which, 'Aristotle concludes, is both a virtue in itself and also the progenitor of virtuous behaviour'. Thus intelligence, virtue and happiness were 'interlocked'. He then gave the prescriptions that follow from this discussion of Aristotelian happiness: 'lasting satisfaction comes from developing your talents to their fullest, doing your job as well as you can, raising a family, and contributing to your community'. Murray implied that critics who had charged Aristotle for promoting bourgeois values were correct, but he argued that Aristotle's philosophy corresponded with 'everyday experience'.[50] This was very different from the esoteric Straussian vision of ancient philosophy. This early discussion of happiness led to social policy prescriptions about limiting crime and giving communities freedom and support in setting their own standards of behaviour, which largely followed Wilson's 'broken windows' strategy, such as supporting communities by ensuring that police did not let drunks pass out in the street.[51]

In 'How Social Policy Shapes Behavior', Murray examined the underclass. According to Murray, 'illegitimate births in poor communities are perhaps the most crucial of the problems associated with the underclass'. By making the consequences of having children out of wedlock less damaging, welfare made pregnancy more attractive. Alongside welfare, more compassion in society also changed the calculus: formerly a pregnant teen might have been expelled from school and socially shunned, whereas in 1991 they were more likely to be encouraged to stay at school and could continue to see their friends. For Murray, public policy should reinforce 'character' and character essentially meant taking responsibility. However, 'the disparate reforms of the 1960s shared (in varying ways and degrees) an assumption that people were not in control of their own behaviour and should not properly be held responsible for the consequences of their actions'.[52] The message received was that good behaviour was 'not necessarily followed by rewards; wrong behaviour is not necessarily followed by penalties. Outcomes are a lottery. When things go wrong, there are ready excuses; when things go well, it is luck.' Thus an Aristotelian discussion of happiness led eventually to a libertarian call to drastically reduce the welfare state. Happiness was a corollary of virtue and Aristotle's virtues,

in Murray's account, were bourgeois virtues. If government efforts to reduce poverty disrupted these virtues, then government was impeding citizens from achieving their *telos*.

More controversially, Murray (and his co-author, Richard Herrnstein) used Aristotle in their discussion of race in *The Bell Curve*. To argue that voting was an action of civic duty, they quoted Aristotle's dictum that 'man is a political animal' and that anybody who did not need society was 'either a bad man or beyond humanity'.[53] They discussed political participation not because it was always indicative of a civil nature but because of a 'statistical trend' – the act of voting was one piece of evidence that people were civil (and in their argument such civility was linked to high IQ). According to Herrnstein and Murray, the Founding Fathers were following Aristotle in their discussion of the implications that follow the inequality of men, and they provided a quotation from Aristotle in support: 'All men believe that justice means equality in some sense ... The question we must keep in mind is, equality or inequality in what sort of thing.'[54] This followed a discussion of the Founders, citing their arguments in favour of a 'natural aristocracy' to criticize the modern 'ideology of equality'.[55] This 'natural aristocracy' discussion might not have been quite so offensive if only applied to class, but here it was used to argue that blacks had, on average, lower IQs than other races and therefore that affirmative action policies were unfair. Aristotle was quoted only minimally in the work, but the conjunction of Aristotle and views on racial intellectual differences was still somewhat jarring given the history of antebellum slavery advocates citing Aristotle to justify slavery.[56]

Perhaps out of a sense of caution following the vitriolic reception of *The Bell Curve*, Murray's 2012 work excluded analysis of America's racial minorities. In *Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960–2010*, he argued that America's success had been built upon its citizenry's moral virtues – religiosity, honesty, industriousness and marriage.[57] But as these virtues had been undermined since 1960 by government policies, working-class people's ability to 'pursue happiness' had been harmed. As usual, Aristotle was cited on the 'the core nature of human happiness', which 'goes all the way back to Aristotle's views [...] in the *Nicomachean Ethics*': 'Happiness consists of lasting and justified satisfaction with life as a whole.' This sort of satisfaction could only be achieved by personally achieving important goals, through effort.[58] America's upper class still

tended to have the virtues that made America a success, but they did not trumpet them enough to the working class.[59]

Throughout Murray's career, the most frequently cited classical author was Aristotle, and it was usually the sections on happiness from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For the actual solutions to the modern moral crisis, Murray often cited Gertrude Himmelfarb's work on Victorian England. This seemed to be the model of society that he aspired to. One in which government schemes played a minimal role and where poverty was ameliorated by civic organizations and charities, and controlled through social disapproval of irresponsible behaviour.

Gertrude Himmelfarb

Although perhaps better known as a historian of Victorian Britain, Himmelfarb (born 1922) was a regular writer for *Commentary* and other neoconservative publications; and her historical works have tended to place a positive spin on those aspects of the Victorian age that she and other neoconservatives saw as the traits of success that could solve the problems of modern America. She studied at Chicago when Strauss was there, wrote an early review of one of his works and probably came into contact with him at the same time as her husband Irving Kristol. Strauss seems to have been an important influence on the circles in which Kristol and Himmelfarb moved. Her brother Milton, himself a neoconservative, also claimed Strauss as an influence. According to Milton, Straussianism was 'an invitation to join those privileged few who, having ascended from the cave, gaze upon the sun with unhooded eyes, while yet mindful of those others below, in the dark'.[60] A good summary of her ideas appears in one of her later works, *The De-Moralization of Society*. The essence of her argument was that Victorian virtues enabled the Victorians to have a spiritual and moral renewal in the midst of jarring social and economic change, and the relevance for contemporary America was clear:

> if they could retain and even strengthen an ethos that had its roots in religion and tradition, it may be that we are not as constrained by the material circumstances of our time as we have thought. A post-industrial economy, we may conclude, does not necessarily entail a post-modernist society or culture.[61]

For neoconservatives, the battle for such a spiritual renewal had already commenced, as they fought an increasingly secularized popular culture from the 1970s onwards. We see here an example of neoconservatives adopting Strauss's 'respect' for religion: Himmelfarb was Jewish, but the renewal she supported was almost entirely made up of the evangelical Christians of the Religious Right. Clearly, a Jewish neoconservative could not simply talk about Jesus and trumpet Christian pieties. One response, adopted in the 1950s when intellectuals felt there was an intellectual (or faith) chasm between themselves and Christian America, would have been to find common ground using the Classics. And Himmelfarb did at this point discuss Aristotle and Plato, but only to highlight the differences between their virtues and those of the Victorians (and, by extension, bourgeois Middle America). The virtues 'celebrated by Aristotle were wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage; associated with these were prudence, magnanimity, munificence, liberality, gentleness'. Some may have been subsumed under different names, but these were not the virtues of the Victorians. In particular, 'family values do not figure among the classical virtues' and 'Plato, of course, would utterly have rejected them, as he rejected the very idea of the family'. Even Aristotle, the preferred 'ancient' among so many neoconservatives, 'did not go so far as to elevate what we would regard as family values to the rank of virtues'.[62]

Drawing upon classical thinking on how different regime types helped to mould different kinds of people,[63] Himmelfarb argued that democratic regimes called for a different range of virtues. Nonetheless, 'it was not until the present century that morality became so thoroughly relativized and subjectified that virtues ceased to be "virtues" and became "values". This transmutation was the great philosophical revolution of modernity, no less momentous than the earlier revolt of the "Moderns" against the "Ancients" – modern science and learning against classical philosophy.' She then traced the emergence of values as opposed to virtues to the original source in Nietzsche and then Weber.[64] This was all very Straussian. But if she believed that different regimes did indeed call for different virtues, wasn't she already a relativist? Again, the answer to the paradox could be suggested by her debt to Strauss: she may have been talking about the exoteric virtues. These were indeed relativistic and depended upon whatever existing regime ruled. But philosophers had their own esoteric virtues, the most important of

which was their devotion to the real, underlying truth of things (which could not be communicated to the public).

So Himmelfarb is an example of a Straussian at the centre of the first wave of neoconservatism, offering interpretations which fitted closely with those of the non-Straussian neoconservatives. She is also an early example of a Straussian seemingly showing little debt to the ancients. Himmelfarb's career has focused almost exclusively on the Victorians. However, in her genealogy of ideas (e.g. virtues to values through Nietzsche and Weber) there is a clear unacknowledged debt to Strauss, and in her terminology (especially the emphasis on the importance of regime types) we can see her debts to Aristotle and Plato.

Robert Nisbet

An early example of the merger between the New Conservatism of the 1950s and the neoconservatism that emerged in the late 1960s was Robert Nisbet. He was often labelled a neoconservative but, unlike the others, he did not come to neoconservatism from the Left. As we saw in Chapter 1, he had been a New Conservative since his *Quest for Community* in 1953. In *Twilight of Authority*, he surmised that America was entering a civilizational twilight. According to Nisbet, during such periods in Western history, 'processes of decline and erosion of institutions are more evident than those of genesis and development [. . .] there is a widely expressed sense of degradation of values and corruption of culture'. He listed a number of previous such twilight periods: the Renaissance as the twilight of the Middle Ages, first-century BC Rome, and 'the post-Peloponnesian War Athens in which the young Plato grew up'.[65] This account is another example of 1970s American declinism; however, Nisbet was focusing on moral causes rather than viewing supposed American decline in more prosaic terms (e.g. economic stagnation or military overstretch). One modern symptom of a twilight period, the 'spreading wave of unreason', was a repeat of the 'social disintegration and militarism that followed the Peloponnesian Wars in ancient Greece and the consequent breakdown of the Athenian *polis*'. Modern America, like ancient Athens, was plagued by 'eruptions of the occult, the superstitious, and the antirational, of faith in blind fortune and chance, and of generalized retreat into the subjective recesses of consciousness'.[66]

In his chapter on restoration, he defined two traditions in Western thought. One originated with Plato, which made the state the centre of political thought; the other originated with Aristotle. Nisbet's Aristotelianism meant a 'clear distinction between social institutions and the political state and the insistence that true freedom in any society proceeds less from what the actual constitution of the political order proper may prescribe than from the relationship that exists between political state, whatever its form of government, and the several institutions of the social sphere'.[67] Like the neoconservative social scientists, Nisbet focused on the family, and argued that it, not the individual, was the 'real molecule of society, the key link of the social chain of being'. But 'from Plato's obliteration of the family in the *Republic* [. . .] hostility to the family has been an abiding element of the West's political clerisy'.[68] Nisbet therefore concluded that Greek thought was the root of the problem for America, as well as its solution. He saw a return to Aristotle's pluralist notion of citizenship as the way to regenerate America.[69] In practice, this would mean less individualism and more emphasis on families and intermediate organizations.

Straussians First, Neoconservatives Second

As we have seen, many of the early neoconservatives had little connection to Strauss. Nonetheless, neoconservatives and Straussians overlapped in many areas, without being always identical. The first generation of Straussians (the students of Strauss himself) largely focused on academia, whilst many of the next generation (the students of his students) developed political careers. The divide was not always this neat. As early as the Republican Party convention of 1964 there was a Straussian influence: Goldwater's famously provocative lines about 'extremism in the defense of liberty' were written by the Straussian political scientist Harry Jaffa.

There are also indications that Straussians and neoconservatives were working together during the late 1960s and 1970s. They jointly contributed to multi-authored volumes on the student unrest of the late 1960s (see Chapter 4) and works containing contributions from Straussians were often published by organs closely associated with neoconservatism. For example, the Straussian volume *Confronting the Constitution: The Challenge to Locke, Montesquieu, Jefferson, and the*

Federalists from Utilitarianism, Historicism, Marxism, Freudianism, Pragmatism, Existentialism...[70] was published by the neoconservative AEI Press. The links sometimes went deeper. One of the contributors to this volume, Werner Dannhauser, who wore the Straussian 'label with pride',[71] combined periods working in academia with periods as an editor of the neoconservative magazine, *Commentary*. Another, Nathan Tarcov, later worked at the Department of State during the Reagan administration.

Strauss's followers have been divided between East Coast Straussians, such as Allan Bloom, and West Coast Straussians, such as Harry Jaffa. The geographical distinction originated from the institutions at which each group was strongest. Part of the dispute between these groups has been the meaning of the political. The East Coasters have tended to see political philosophy as merely 'the deference philosophy pays to what it is compelled to obey and what it perforce pretends to esteem', whilst West Coasters have regarded 'political philosophy as offering substantive moral guidance to political life on issues like religion, patriotism, and the status of America among the nations of the world'.[72] In practical terms, the East Coast Straussians have tended to be more sceptical and have often continued to work in academia, whilst West Coast Straussians have been more politically engaged.

Harry Jaffa

Jaffa (1918–2015) is best known for his works on Abraham Lincoln and the American Founding. According to Jaffa, Locke had a 'massive influence on America' and was responsible for its essentially modern character. However, 'the American regime was not formed only by Locke' because of the influence of the Bible and Shakespeare. But even the modern influences on America often had a classical twin. For example, although Jaffa focused his own research on Lincoln, Lincoln was best understood as an exemplary model of the virtues Aristotle expounded in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Likewise, Shakespeare was 'the great vehicle within the Anglo-American world for the transmission of an essentially Socratic understanding of the civilization of the West'.[73] Jaffa argued that 'Shakespeare was the poet mentioned by Socrates at the end of the *Symposium*', whom Plato had foretold would be a master of both tragedy and comedy.[74] According to Jaffa, 'only Strauss could have led me to see that Shakespeare's inner and ultimate motivation was Platonic'.[75]

However, Jaffa wrote that Strauss believed that America 'no longer dwelt within the precincts of the principles of the Declaration', and that Strauss's *Natural Right and History* went 'a long way toward explaining why' without ever saying how 'the authority of those principles might be restored'. For Jaffa, based on conversations with Strauss, the 'restoration of Lincoln was the most likely way to restore the aforesaid authority, and that this was the form in which the statesmanship of classical political philosophy might become authoritative in our world'. According to Jaffa, Strauss 'propelled my articulation of the connection between Plato, biblical religion, Shakespeare, and Lincoln'.[76] In Jaffa's view, the fundamental difference between Lincoln and Senator Stephen Douglas in their famous 1858 debates over slavery, 'was identical in principle with the opposition in Book I of the *Republic* of Socrates and Thrasymachus'. Douglas' majoritarianism was essentially the right of the stronger to do what they wanted, whereas Lincoln embodied Socrates in arguing that there were 'moral boundaries to what majorities or minorities might rightfully do'.[77]

According to Jaffa, the East Coast Straussians considered the reference to happiness in the Declaration of Independence to have been 'Hobbesian or idiosyncratic', which meant acting 'without regard to reason'. In contrast, Jaffa considered it 'impossible to imagine anything more Aristotelian than the assertion of the union of virtue and happiness'. The right to the pursuit of happiness enumerated in the Declaration of Independence was essentially the 'pursuit of virtue'. Jaffa argued that the founders were not simply moderns, and that the natural aristocracy he and Strauss advocated was the intention of Jefferson and the other founders (all 'Aristotelians').[78]

East Coast Straussians: Walter Berns

Another Straussian who focused upon American constitutional history was Walter Berns (1919–2015). Like Jaffa, Berns focused on the American constitution and viewed it through a classical prism. His goal was 'to restore and preserve Socratic philosophizing'.[79] In *Freedom, Virtue and the First Amendment*, he criticized contemporary liberal Supreme Court decisions, but did not want to ally himself with 'the so-called conservative movement'.[80] Nevertheless, he was influential with neoconservatives. Berns echoed Kendall in justifying censorship and arguing that a good regime would deny communists the 'freedom to

perform bad acts, such as teaching and advocating an immoral political doctrine'. The difficulty of the task of defining goodness should not 'beguile us in taking easy refuge in the belief that all moral differences, like all differences between political regimes, are based on unscientific value judgements'.[81] Berns preferred Aristotle's version of the law, in which people could do only what the law allowed, over Hobbes' version in which anything the law did not forbid was allowed.[82] In conclusion, 'government should seek to attain justice and promote the virtue of citizens as a part of attaining justice'.[83] This emphasis on virtue, drawn from his Straussian engagement with classical philosophy, was therefore in tune with the neoconservatives' emphasis on virtue drawn from their experiences of government failure.

According to Berns, democracy had become utopian since the American Founding. It had moved from the right to 'pursue' happiness, to the right to enjoy 'all the pleasures of a fully human existence'. Unfortunately, nature prevented everybody from having the capacity for a full human life. For Berns, 'to live the fully human life calls for the contemplative capacity; it calls for depth of understanding of the human condition and one's own condition. Nature distributed that capacity unequally'. And since the contemplative life for all was impossible to achieve, democracy ended up resenting reason. Modern idealism was a 'corruption of the Platonic view' that, 'the rational portion of the mind had the highest status in the composition of reality as against merely material actuality'. According to Berns, the ancients believed that 'human virtue consists in the noble subordination or regulation of the lower desires. That is what was perennially inspiring and difficult in Plato and Aristotle'; however, in modern America 'a new and dogmatized version of idealism has emerged'. This type of idealism was completely compatible with 'the utter absence of individual virtue' and was 'at bottom a triumph of materialism'.[84]

Straussians have struggled with a paradox: modernity was bad, America was modern, but America was mostly good. Despite their disagreements, Jaffa and Berns agreed that to some extent the liberalism of the founders left room for the pre-liberal virtuous practices of the early Americans to continue.[85] Where Jaffa disagreed with other Straussians was in his view that the Founders were basically Lockean and it was Lincoln who had improved upon them because he was essentially 'an ancient', whose ideas echoed the framework of Aristotle's *Ethics*.

Thus Lincoln 'completed' the founding by adding the virtuous elements of ancient natural right to the American tradition. In contrast, Berns and other East Coast Straussians concluded that the American Founding had fundamental flaws which Lincoln and succeeding leaders had exacerbated by reducing even further the classical elements of the American constitution.

The Younger Generation: the Straussian/Neocon Fusion

According to Hadley Arkes, a second generation Straussian, the turn to government of many Straussians was forced upon them by opponents in academia. Straussians had 'been blocked out of the most prestigious universities, by a system of political screening as forbidding as any blacklist, and far more effective'. Some 'found refuge in the government, where they had the chance to write and sustain their interests while working as staffers for Republicans in Congress'.[86] Straussians Michael Uhlmann (counsellor to Ronald Reagan) and Angelo Codevilla (in the Senate Committee on Intelligence) both worked in the Reagan administration, and other Straussians who worked in Republican administrations included a number of Allan Bloom's students, such as Paul Wolfowitz, Francis Fukuyama, Abram Shulsky, Charles Fairbanks, Alan Keyes and Kenneth Weinstein. By the 1990s political Straussians tended to be known simply as neoconservatives.

William Kristol (born 1952), son of Irving Kristol and Gertrude Himmelfarb, founded the *Weekly Standard*, an influential neoconservative magazine, in 1995. He was described by Drury as 'the leading political strategist of the Republican party' in the 1990s.[87] More colloquially the *New Republic* described Kristol as 'Dan Quayle's brain' during his stint as the Chief of Staff to Quayle when the latter was Vice-President to President Bush senior. When Kristol entered Harvard in 1970 he came into contact with a number of prominent neoconservatives, including James Q. Wilson, Edward Banfield, Daniel Bell and Nathan Glazer, but he was especially influenced by the Straussian Harvey C. Mansfield. In Kristol's case, we see the distinction between Straussians and neoconservatives breaking down entirely. As we shall see in Chapter 5, Kristol claimed that Greek thought, as interpreted by Leo Strauss, was influential in the foreign policy of the second Bush administration.

Not all Straussians committed themselves to politics for so long. Francis Fukuyama (born 1952), after serving in the Reagan administration, returned to academia and has continued to publish, most famously *The End of History and the Last Man*,[88] which will be considered for its contribution to foreign policy debates in Chapter 5. On domestic policy, Fukuyama's views mirrored those of Murray and Himmelfarb, and his analysis was very much concerned with a re-moralization of America. According to Fukuyama, alongside the economic and technological changes of the postwar period, during which Western economies have moved towards becoming post-industrial or information age economies, there has also been a steep moral decline, which was 'readily measurable in statistics on crime, fatherless children, reduced educational outcomes and opportunities, broken trust, and the like'. Unlike earlier Straussians, who had followed Strauss in positing purely philosophical roots to the decline in society, Fukuyama's approach linked the 'negative social trends' to the 'transition from the industrial to the information era'. Technology, such as the pill and rising longevity, reduced the need for long-term relationships, the move from physical to mental labour assisted the move of women into the workforce, and thus made them less reliant on men, and the 'culture of intensive individualism' necessary for successful market economies, 'corroded virtually all forms of authority and weakened the bonds holding families, neighbourhoods and nations together'.[89]

However, like other Straussians, Fukuyama viewed liberalism's flaw as its descent from Enlightenment natural rights theories (i.e. Hobbes' view that people band together out of fear rather than out of the enjoyment they gain from social interaction). And he pointed out that 'this Hobbesian view is not the only possible view', suggesting that Aristotle's view of man as a political animal was a more 'commonsense' alternative.[90] Like Murray and Wilson, Fukuyama's emphasis was on Aristotle throughout, particularly where Aristotle emphasized the role of habit in creating moral character. According to Aristotle, 'moral virtue, unlike intellectual virtue, is learned through habit and repetition, such that initially unpleasant activities either become pleasant, or at any rate, less unpleasant'. Thus, a 'social habit, once learned, cannot be changed nearly as easily as an idea or belief that can be discredited'.[91]

Fukuyama also argued that people wanted to rule and that hierarchies were necessary, and he again used Aristotle's description of man as a political animal in support (i.e. man was not a social animal). The description of the way that capitalism undermined morality was reminiscent of Daniel Bell, and he cited Bell for his belief that a market economy could undermine the moral foundations of its own success. Nonetheless, Fukuyama surmised that the real problem was not the market, but the disruptive technological change which the market engendered. Fukuyama saw hope for the future in falling crime statistics and a levelling off of illegitimacy rates, which might suggest that society was adapting to the changes. Following Himmelfarb, Fukuyama also asserted that the process of moral recovery could be assisted by government and he cited the Victorian period as an example of successful moral rejuvenation.[92] Thus by the 1990s we see that key Straussian thinkers had adopted many of the critiques of the earlier neoconservative sociologists, subtly changing their critiques. Where Strauss had posited moral decline as a product of philosophical decline (or bringing philosophical ideas into a public sphere incapable of safely engaging with them), Fukuyama blamed underlying structural changes, such as capitalist innovation and individualism, for the changes in morality. Furthermore, in contrast to the earlier conservative, and Straussian, focus on Plato for a recovery of morality by understanding truth as truth, Fukuyama seemed to adopt a relativistic approach, echoing Wilson and Murray's emphasis on Aristotelian habituation to a moral code, regardless of the inherent truthfulness of that moral code.

As conservatives in the 1950s and early 1960s became better organized and established their own organs to disseminate their ideas, there was more and more 'preaching to the choir' and less of an effort to woo the centre and left. There was also less emphasis on returning afresh to the Greek writers with whom postwar thinkers like Weaver had engaged. Engagement with the Greek past has tended to be a more revolutionary act, belonging to the early stages of a movement, before its ideas become hard and immobile. From the 1970s onwards, the direct engagement with Greece was being undertaken by another group of liminal figures: the neoconservatives. Turning their backs on the Left, but not quite willing to adopt *in toto* the positions of older conservatives, Greek thought became again something to be thought about and with, a novel way to rationalize their divorce from the Left and to rethink their

progressive views and adapt them for new, anti-progressive positions on social policy.

In the 1970s, the very victories of progressivism – Roe versus Wade, gay rights, feminism – energized and recreated conservatism as a grass roots force, and one with wider appeal than existing grass roots anti-communism (which was anyway beginning to fracture with the drawn-out failure to win the Vietnam War). The intellectual grounds for the new conservatism were laid in the 1950s, but there was an organizational shift in the 1960s and 1970s, and the recruitment of the neoconservatives brought a more technocratic, policy capable group of intellectuals into the conservative fold. The disillusionment of the 1970s was driven by recognition of failure on both Right and Left. Some of the failures, or at least policies that delivered less than expected, belonged almost entirely to one side of the political spectrum, such as the Democrats' Great Society agenda under Lyndon Johnson. But many of the eventual failures of American policy, such as American involvement in Vietnam or the establishment of the Bretton Woods international financial system after World War II, had initially enjoyed largely bipartisan support. According to Critchlow, most members of the neoconservative movement 'tended to distrust what became known as the Religious Right. Moreover, the heavy influence of classical thought found in their Straussian training imbued them with a faith in elite leadership'.[93] So neoconservatives utilized the Religious Right, but only in order to place a new elite in charge (themselves). Likewise, the Straussian emphasis on virtue seemed to link them with the traditionalists but this appearance was deceptive, and the neoconservatives were often more in tune with the libertarian wing than with religious conservatives.

Beyond a few figures like Irving Kristol and, to a lesser extent, Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Gertrude Himmelfarb, there was no deep causal link between the classicism of Leo Strauss and the early neoconservatives. In places, there was an indirect link, for instance through the influence of Strauss's ideas on Platonic utopianism influencing Kristol and then permeating the neoconservative movement, without necessarily always being attributable to Strauss or Plato. Neoconservative thinkers such as Daniel Bell and Nathan Glazer shared the Straussians' anti-utopianism, but for them it was based upon their experiences as architects and analysts of the 'Great Society' welfare programmes, rather than any deep

engagement with Plato. And first-generation Straussians like Walter Berns and Harry Jaffa were often most influential in their writings on the American Founding and America's constitution – using Straussian methods, working within Strauss's 'ancients versus moderns' framework but focusing on the modern. In the next generation, the lines between neoconservatives and Straussians were further blurred as the children of first-generation neoconservatives studied under Straussian academics, and Straussian-trained academics increasingly left academia for roles in government.

A more significant classical appropriation was the use made of Aristotle by a number of influential neoconservative social scientists, such as James Q. Wilson and Charles Murray. Coming as they did from the Left, neoconservative social scientists were heirs to the Enlightenment thinking criticized by Strauss and they were much more in tune with Enlightenment and modernist thinkers. And Straussians, in outlook and methodology, were not cut out for social science. They were trained to analyse texts minutely, not to collect and dissect the masses of quantitative data necessary for large-scale social analysis. The engagement of most neoconservatives with Antiquity was not of the order of a profound rethinking of the sort undertaken by Strauss. Plato and Aristotle had prestige and could be added to an already thought-out argument as the icing on the cake rather than as the filling, as was the case with Strauss. At the same time, it was not always simply a case of using the prestige of Antiquity as window-dressing. Neoconservative interpretations had some aspects in common with those of the Straussians, but perhaps more in common with similar critiques of atomizing liberalism being undertaken by contemporary thinkers with communitarian tendencies, such as Alasdair MacIntyre. Failing government programmes prompted a rethink of the limits of quantitative analysis and a return to value judgements – and for that Weber needed to be replaced by a new 'authority'. Aristotle seemed to fit the bill.

In both cases, there was a need to critique the modern, post-1960s form of big-government liberalism. Some neoconservatives, Kristol prominent among them, turned to theory, utilizing Greek thought to justify their rightward shift and to explain the apparent failures of liberalism. For others, such as Glazer and Bell, a seemingly more objective, data-driven approach to social problems was more attractive

than appeals to Antiquity. Still others, like Wilson and Murray, found a middle ground – maintaining a quantitative approach to contemporary issues, and using classical quotations as the voice of 'commonsense' to provide the rhetorical cherry on top. Consequently, whilst uses of the Classics were apparently minimal during this period, the Straussians, and their interpretation of ancient political philosophy, were making hidden inroads. Kristol was the only significant first-generation neoconservative to fully adopt and utilize Strauss's interpretation of ancient thought, but Straussians and neoconservatives were drawing close enough together that from the 1980s onwards they became largely indistinguishable.

CHAPTER 4

THE CLASSICIZING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

> Throughout this book I have referred to Plato's *Republic*, which is for me *the* book on education.
>
> Allan Bloom[1]

This chapter examines the appropriation of Greek thought in conservative works on higher education during the 1980s. It begins with some contextualization of these debates within the Culture Wars that erupted in the 1970s, before tracing the genealogy of Greek thought in earlier conservative attacks on academic relativism, declining standards and egalitarianism. It then focuses on two high profile and controversial contributors to the 1980s debates: William Bennett (born 1943), Education Secretary in the Reagan administration, and Allan Bloom (1930–1992), author of the bestselling *The Closing of the American Mind*, which has been labelled the 'über-text' of the Culture Wars.[2] Both writers made frequent appeals to the virtues of ancient Greece, but there were also a number of intriguing differences in their approaches to ancient thought.

The 1980s seemed to represent the great political victory of American conservatism. Ronald Reagan's election as president in the 1980 election superficially demonstrated the triumphant rise of conservatism from its nadir after World War II. After a series of political successes, like the nomination of Barry Goldwater as the Republican presidential candidate, and setbacks, like the landslide defeat of Goldwater in the

election, they eventually consolidated their control of the Republican Party in the 1970s. The process was completed when Reagan entered the White House. That election also saw the Republicans make large gains in the House of Representatives and regain control of the Senate for the first time since 1954. With these successes, American conservatism seemed finally to have prevailed. But the 1980s serve as a reminder of the limits of political power. David Stockman, Reagan's Director of the Office of Management and Budget in his first term, admitted that the Reagan administration failed in its goal of rolling back the state. Reagan was able to cut taxes, but hopes were dashed that this would 'starve the beast' of big government. Instead, tax cuts were funded by unprecedented peacetime borrowing. A wider group of conservative intellectuals grew ever more despondent over America's apparent cultural decay as the Reagan decade wore on. In some ways Reagan's relative inaction over social and cultural issues should have been predictable. Despite championing socially conservative positions during the presidential campaign, his political record demonstrated his real priorities. As governor of California he had radically liberalized the state's abortion laws and as late as 1978 he had opposed a proposed law in California which would have made it possible for schools to fire teachers based upon their sexual preferences. While he was reliably conservative on taxes and regulation, he remained a divorced Hollywood progressive when it came to keeping government out of people's homes.

By the beginning of Reagan's presidency, the place of religion in US public life had for a long time engendered fundamental disagreement, such as whether to allow prayers in schools and whether evolution should be taught in them (for example, the Scopes Trial of 1926). The Culture Wars began to heat up again in the 1970s and its battles were fought over a range of issues, including education, gay rights, feminism, and, perhaps the most enduring and emotive issue, abortion. Government support for art also became a hotly contested topic in the late 1980s, when Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* and an exhibition of homoerotic photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, supported by funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, caused public outrage. At issue was whether taxpayers' money should have been subsidizing art that offended large numbers of the public (and whether selectively funding less contentious work would be a form of censorship). These debates pitted Christian social conservatives against liberals. The nature of the

West was contested in these debates, and supposed exemplars of Western civilization were used on either side in support of their causes. In those disputes over government funding for art, the key examples were usually drawn from Renaissance Italy; conservatives lauding Italian masters for their choices of religious and spiritually uplifting themes,[3] liberals focusing on examples of Renaissance art which challenged the preconceptions of their times.[4]

The field of higher education was not initially one of the hot spots in the Culture Wars. In 1982, conservative historian Stephen Tonsor had been optimistic about the prospects for the liberal arts in American education. He argued that the desirability of liberal arts went in cycles, and that the liberal arts tradition was then rising in influence. After a period of decline during the 1970s, numerous colleges were again making liberal arts survey courses compulsory and investigating ways of further boosting the place of liberal arts in their curricula.[5] However, nine years later, after a decade of conservative government, he was complaining to conservative publisher Henry Regnery about the imminent 'collapse in the Humanities on a national scale' due to growing relativism in the universities. He went on to compare the influence of academics under 50 to the AIDS virus and suggested that their takeover of the universities was 'rather like the takeover of the German universities by the Nazis'.[6]

In 'Culture War' debates over education, which reached their zenith in the 1980s, it was the Greeks who tended to be annexed as symbols of 'West-ness'. Such American idealizing of the Greeks was hardly new, and some excellent visual examples could be drawn from the statuary of the Main Reading Room in the Library of Congress, completed in 1897. Of the 16 statues representing the eight characteristic forms of knowledge necessary for civilization (with each form being represented by an ancient and a modern figure), four were symbolized by Greeks (Plato as Philosophy, Homer as Poetry, Herodotus as History, and Solon as Law). Such overt exaltation of Antiquity had gone out of fashion long before the 1980s, but it returned in the writings of conservatives in that decade. This is not to say that all of the conservative appropriations of ancient Greece in the 1980s were similarly simple paeans to Grecian grandeur. Critics like Allan Bloom used Greek thinkers to forcefully critique American culture in ways that, if fully understood, would have shocked the conservative rank and file. And even when conservatives attempted to praise Greek

virtues in the most apparently straightforward ways, these appropriations took place in such a contested environment, peopled by critics of the canon and the dominance in the curriculum of 'dead white males', that statements which would have been unobjectionable a few years earlier became much more provocative. As well as these disputes between educational radicals and traditionalists, who often appealed to a conservative audience even if they themselves claimed to be liberals, the 1980s also witnessed internal disagreements breaking out between neoconservatives and traditionalist conservatives, which had longer-term implications for the unity of the conservative movement.

Crisis on the Campus?

Radical changes had been taking place in academia for at least a generation leading up to the public and often bitter controversies of the 1980s. There had been a significant expansion of higher education institutions, rising from around 2,000 in 1960 to 3,595 in 1990.[7] This expansion was also accompanied by an overdue increase in the gender and racial diversity of the student body. However, the tools used to promote diversity were often quite blunt, and affirmative action resulted in losers as well as winners. An individual who had missed out on a university place to somebody who had achieved lower test scores would feel that they had suffered an injustice, and the fact that it was done to solve a different injustice would not solve the problem for the individual adversely affected. The fact that ethnic minorities could gain entrance to prestigious universities with significantly lower test scores than would permit whites to enter particularly riled conservatives. For example, in 1988 the average SAT score for a white freshman at the University of Virginia was 247 points higher than for the average black freshman.[8] Advocates argued that this was about fairness and redressing the unequal educational chances of minorities, whilst conservatives focused on the fairness issue of white students being denied places in favour of minority students whom they had outscored in exams.

Change had also taken place in the ways academics tackled their work, and these new approaches and research objects made convenient targets for conservatives looking to take control of, or at least undermine, a predominantly liberal academic community. Cultural relativism had been the dominant approach within anthropology since

the 1950s, but it had spread into other humanities disciplines by the 1980s, joined by other radical ways of looking at society and its creations (made up of a diverse range of thought, subsumed under the generic 'theory' label). The ideas of thinkers like Barbara Herrnstein Smith ('literary value is radically relative') and Terry Eagleton ('there is no such thing as literature which is "really" great')[9] were bound to provoke conservatives. And those who resisted these movements were not always political conservatives. The fact that these changes coincided with a relative decline in the number of students choosing to study the humanities seemed to support conservative criticism that these radical methodologies were unpopular with students (though, of course, correlation is not necessarily causation). In 1966 humanities majors made up 20 per cent of all degrees awarded, but by 1990 they made up fewer than ten per cent.[10] As we shall see, conservatives tended to blame this relative decline on the politicization of academia and its takeover by left-wing ideologues, but a *New York Times* article of 1981 quoted a university vice-chancellor claiming that 'the liberal arts era is over' because students were opting for more career-oriented courses which employers preferred.[11]

The very idea of a liberal education defended by conservatives of the 1980s as a trans-historical concept was really a discrete historical phenomenon largely created out of educational debates in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Greece had been at the centre of the liberal arts tradition as it developed in America before the Civil War. Although the Classics eventually lost their place at the centre of higher education, the defence of studying the ancients used by nineteenth-century classicists – that it 'ennobled the self and formed the conscientious citizen' – was adopted by the rest of the humanities in the early twentieth century.[12] These earlier debates, in which Greece played a central role, help to explain why it retained a significant role in modern debates despite being only a small fragment of the modern humanities. Antiquity had also been central to the Great Books tradition from its inception. Robert M. Hutchins, the founder of the Great Books regime at Chicago in the 1930s, had asserted that,

> a classic is a book that is contemporary in every age [...] the conversations of Socrates raise questions that are as urgent today as they were when Plato wrote. In fact they are more so, because the

> society in which Plato lived did not need to have them raised as much as we do.[13]

Plato was put on a pedestal but so too was Athens, because Athens did not need Plato as much as America did.

Those attacking the traditional canon did so on epistemological grounds, arguing that there could be no universally held set of human truths, and on political grounds, arguing that the existing 'white, male' canon reinforced the dominance of a rich, white patriarchy. Although the Great Books curriculum itself was no longer pre-eminent in the 1980s, it still retained a mark of distinction and added a 'touch of class' to the curriculum; and because it added a common traditional strand to the education of students, institutions were loath to lose it.[14] Accordingly, proposed changes to what was a small part of the curriculum garnered attention and controversy beyond their seeming importance. For example, a debate at Stanford over planned changes to its Western civilization programme degenerated into a bitter two-year battle which became the focus of national attention. Students campaigned to abolish the programme, protesting during a faculty debate with chants of 'Hey, hey, ho, ho, western culture's got to go!' and 'Down with racism, down with western culture, up with diversity!' Conservatives accused the protesters of intimidation, though this has been disputed.[15] The course was eventually replaced by a 'Culture, Ideas and Values' course which emphasized diversity and enabled students to choose from a wider range of options. Similarly heated debates took place at universities across America in the 1980s. Whilst one survey showed that the percentage of colleges offering courses in Western civilization actually rose during the period (from 43.1 per cent in 1970, to 48.5 per cent in 1985 and to 53 per cent by 1990[16]), the real criticism for conservatives, which was not reflected in such statistics, was that the authors they defended as 'great' (aka the 'dead white males') were becoming either one option among many or were being studied from perspectives with which conservatives intensely disagreed (feminist, post-modernist, historicist and so on).

Conservative Critiques

As we saw in Chapter 1, the attack on education was a key plank of Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*; and Buckley's early *God and Man at*

Yale[17] had criticized Yale University for not defending religion and capitalism against the assaults of atheistic communists. One of the earliest influences on Buckley had been his father's friend Albert Jay Nock (1870–1945), a classical liberal who wrote much on economic issues but also published a forerunner to later conservative critiques of education. As far back as 1932, Nock had made many of the same criticisms that conservatives would repeat decades later: early twentieth-century reforms had resulted in a drop in the quality of American graduates; education had been made more specialized and more relevant to business and science, with the result that the former liberal education was lost; and the reason for the deterioration was that America's affection for democracy and egalitarianism had been taken too far. Like Weaver and unlike the later neoconservatives, Nock had made no effort to disguise his elitism. He argued that, because modern educators believed that all people were equally educable, their response when people failed to succeed at difficult subjects was to make those subjects easier. American egalitarianism assumed that everybody could be educated, but 'the vast majority of mankind have neither the force of intellect to appreciate the processes of education, nor the force of character to make an educational discipline prevail in their lives'.[18]

Like most writers of the Right, Nock focused upon the Western tradition, especially Greece and Rome, which covered the longest period of

> the human mind's operations in poetry, drama, law, agriculture, philosophy, architecture, natural history, philology, rhetoric, astronomy, politics, medicine, theology, geography, everything [. . .] the mind that has attentively canvassed this record is not only a disciplined mind but an experienced mind; a mind that instinctively views any contemporary phenomenon from the vantage point of an immensely long perspective attained through a profound and weighty experience of the human spirit's operations.[19]

An education in the Classics therefore gave 'the outward and visible signs, of the inward and spiritual grace of maturity [. . .] the constant aim at inculcation of these views and demands is what we know under the name of the Great Tradition of our republic'. However, Nock was

very pessimistic about America ever returning to this 'Great Tradition'. According to Nock, by the time America recognized its need to enact serious change it would be powerless to do anything about it.[20]

What Nock could not know was that the Great Books movement would within a few years reverse at least one of those educational changes that he abhorred (specialization) and return American colleges to a system in which the majority of students, of whatever discipline, studied at least some literature from the classical canon. The first Great Books course started at Columbia under John Erskine in 1921, but Mortimer Adler took the concept to Chicago in 1930 after meeting with its founder Robert Hutchins. The Adler/Hutchins course originally lasted for two years and covered 443 works by 76 authors with an oral exam at the end. The first cohort of students asked to repeat the course, so it became a four-year Great Books course and it was this format which swept the nation over the next 30 years.

As we have seen, from the 1960s onwards, demands for racial justice and women's rights included calls for a more inclusive canon. And these demands coincided with philosophical developments undermining the entire concept of a canon of 'great' books capable of imparting universal truths to their readers. At the time, reaction was mixed and there was even some support for the demands of the students for change – especially from neoconservatives who were then still nominally on the Left. Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol edited a volume of papers from neoconservative thinkers seeking to understand the student protests. In contrast with later critiques, their tone was measured and sociological, as they sought to understand the root causes of student discontent. Their sympathies lay in large measure with the students who had genuine grievances against their professors. According to their introduction, the professoriat had expanded after the War to become a 'new class', with the characteristics of other such groups: 'a keen sensitivity to status distinctions, aspirations toward upward mobility, resentments at each and every sign of "relative deprivation" and so on'. The growing importance of research in a knowledge economy had increased the importance of the university with regards to public policy but also made universities more dependent on federal funding. However, the aims of militant black campaigners were more political than moral, and education was merely the medium for them to achieve 'status and power'. Blacks were 'openly and directly seeking to carve out for

themselves, right now, a special enclave within the university which will concede to them a measure of self-governing power, and which will allow them to enlarge the number of blacks in the university system with little regard to the traditional criteria of competence'.[21] The issue of blacks' 'competence' would recur in conservative writings in the 1980s with respect to affirmative action.

Going further, Nathan Tarcov, a Straussian at Cornell during this period, implied that the real goal of all the protesters was to make university easier. He wrote of making difficult courses optional and ending foreign language requirements. The administrators' efforts to talk with the protesters amounted to 'appeasement'.[22] In the 1980s, Bloom would also write with anger about this period at Cornell. In addition to curriculum changes, a number of students wanted to have a professor fired for his 'covert' racism and they eventually occupied a classroom and threatened violence without being punished. Tarcov's conclusion was fairly representative of the book – he deplored the violence, but at the same time believed that the protests might 'serve the useful purpose of drawing attention to undergraduate education' and thereby 'give us more perspective on its purpose'.[23] Like his fellow Straussians, Tarcov and Bloom, Walter Berns seemed to be angrier with the university academics and administrators for caving in to the protesters than with the grievances of the protesters themselves. They 'signed the most abject surrender terms at gunpoint' and he had 'underestimated the extent to which liberal academicians, along with liberals outside the academy, are no longer attached to the principles that are supposed to govern both country and academy'. Like Tarcov, Berns compared the administrators to the European powers who appeased Hitler. They were unable to recognize fascism 'when it speaks with the accents of the Left and appears in the guise of black militants and white professors and students with bullhorns [. . .] what the Cornell situation revealed is the ease with which institutions defended by modern liberals can be destroyed'.[24] Strauss, with his experiences of Weimar Germany, had been warning about the inability of liberal democracies to deal with totalitarians and now, for his students, the New Left of the 1960s provided the clearest evidence that he had been right all along.

The politicization of the university also came under attack from Robert Nisbet in *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma: The University in America, 1945–1970*. For Nisbet, the university ideal was 'dispassionate

reason, of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, of objective study of nature, society, and man'. This ideal was the product of ancient Greece.[25] He asked, 'Is there any more promising hallmark for a civilized society than its willingness to support a class of persons whose principal business is to think, to arrive at knowledge, and to induct others in this principal business?'[26] He viewed the degradation of the university as something that predated the student unrest of the 1960s and he actually thanked the student rebels for demonstrating 'how deeply fissured, even fragmented, the academic community' had become by the ease with which they 'succeeded in bringing to their knees not merely deans and presidents but entire faculties'.[27] Unlike critics of the 1980s, he was not a supporter of Great Books courses (labelling them 'Great Snippets' courses) and the 'liberal arts cults of the 1950s' were only a short step to the 'kinds of encounter, sensitivity, and individuality courses' that came into being in the 1960s.[28] Nevertheless, his suggestion for improving the standing of universities was a return to the ideals of the past.

Nisbet did not especially fetishize the Classics: 'much harm has been done to the university in times past by those who have tried to make the Classics, say, or "liberal arts", or "general education" or perhaps some imagined need of the human personality the exclusive or chief subject of the university'. His concern was not what particular subjects were taught, but 'the mission of the university, the role of the academic community in contemporary society' and he was against the idea that the university should attempt to solve society's problems. His outline for getting back to the original mission of higher education included the familiar 'repudiation of historicism', 'the restoration of authority' and 'the depoliticization of the university'. But he also argued for a 'clearing of the scene', by which he meant getting rid of 'at least 75 per cent of all existing institutes, centers and bureaus', to stop the university from attempting to solve all the problems of society.[29] This was a similar suggestion to that of Eric Voegelin, who had also seen the growth of research as a symptom of deep problems within academia.

In some ways all these writers were attacking relativism and defending moral absolutism, as conservatives had been doing since the 1940s. Russell Kirk was still doing this in the 1980s using Voegelin's terminology from the 1950s. Rather than engage directly with post-1950s philosophical developments, Kirk lumped them all together as a rejection of transcendence: the 'university which ridicules the claims of

the transcendent must end without intellectual coherence – and without genuine intellectual freedom'.[30] Whereas Kirk's premier conservative forebear was always Edmund Burke, this discussion of education was one of the few times that he used Greece to buttress his arguments. According to Kirk, a high degree of personal freedom

> was achieved by certain Greek peoples in the sixth and fifth centuries before Christ. This noble freedom decayed when the old Greek religion and morality gave way to sophistry [and even] the genius of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle did not suffice to restore the Greek freedom of spirit and law, once the belief in the divine ordering of things had dissolved.[31]

Apart from the simplification and distortion of Greek history here, what is interesting was the faint praise Kirk accorded Greek philosophy in comparison with Greek religion. Greek greatness was really a result of Greek religion. There was therefore no need to return to Greek philosophy (or, really, for universities at all). All that was needed was 'a belief in the divine ordering of things'. The only other use for Antiquity was as a warning when we 'look upon the ruins' of Greece and Rome. 'The material splendor of those societies was at its height not long before the collapse of faith and liberty'.[32] The lessons for America were plain.

Neocons and Paleo-cons

Conservatives of all persuasions initially agreed that Reagan's 1980 election victory was their opportunity to put into practice the ideas they had been arguing for since the 1950s, and a key part of their agenda was a counter-attack in the cultural arena. For Kirk, America was 'entering upon a period of conservative policies in this American Republic'. Conservatives had been critiquing the dominant liberal, relativist agenda since Weaver in the 1940s; but now, 'those conservative concepts, popularized, are about to enter practical politics'. Reagan's election victory was the culmination of three decades of 'serious thought' by conservative intellectuals, which had been

> vulgarized and filtered and transmuted, through newspaper editorials and Sunday sermons and college lectures and paperback

> books and even television programs, until a crowd of people perhaps wholly unaware of the sources of their convictions come to embrace a particular view of religion or of morals or of politics.[33]

The frustrating aspect for traditionalists, however, was that their own place within conservatism was being threatened just as the movement itself was gaining real power. New Conservatives like Kirk, who had been combatting liberalism since the 1950s, were not rewarded with positions in the Reagan administration, whereas Straussians and neoconservatives, who had been liberals as recently as the 1970s, were. The selection of William Bennett to lead the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) incited a public spat between the traditionalists (shortly to be dubbed 'paleo-conservatives') and the neoconservatives. The NEH, founded in 1965, 'serves and strengthens our republic by promoting excellence in the humanities and conveying the lessons of history to all Americans',[34] primarily by handing out grant money to support humanities research projects. Whilst Bennett was the candidate preferred by neoconservatives, Mel Bradford (1934–93), the leading traditionalist defender of the Old South, had the support of the paleo-conservatives.

According to one Bradford partisan, the paleo-conservative Samuel Francis, 'unwilling to contend against his expressed views in public, some neoconservative supporters of Bennett (though not Bennett himself) launched a sub-rosa attack on Bradford's character, even as they protested admiration for him in public'. As well as anger at the neoconservatives' underhanded betrayal, the paleo-conservatives and the neoconservatives also had philosophical differences. According to Francis

> the Old Right was committed to conserving what it took to the unique historic identity of American society as a continuation of the Anglo-Saxon political tradition and the western European Christian tradition in social, moral and aesthetic values. The neoconservatives appear to have little interest in conserving the historic realities of the American tradition and indeed show little sympathy for the Christian heritage beyond a highly selective amalgamation of Judaism and Calvinist Protestantism.[35]

Neoconservatives like Kristol were really defenders of bourgeois modernity, whereas the paleo-conservatives were highly critical of modernism. To Francis, with some justification, the neoconservatives were really 1950s centrist liberals who had not changed with the times. The paleo-conservative historian Paul Gottfried (1941–), a follower of Mel Bradford, has written a number of works on the American conservative movement in which he argued that there was a 'continuing symbiotic relationship' between neoconservatives and Straussians.[36] Straussians were extreme democrats who favoured strong, democratic leaders and despised bourgeois liberalism. The classical elements were really a cover because their main focus was on protecting Enlightenment modernity against more radical thinkers from the third wave of modernity. They were still committed to reason and their versions of ancient thinkers were really just Enlightenment rationalists who wrote secretly. According to Gottfried, the Straussian focus on the founders of regimes had 'less to do with anti-democratic elitism than it does with what Strauss and his followers seek to ignore, namely the ethnic and cultural preconditions for the creation of political orders'. Straussians were completely opposed to any suggestion that 'successful constitutional orders are the expressions of already formed nations and cultures'. The 'celebration of the American present, as opposed to any march into the past, is a defining characteristic of the Straussians' hermeneutics'. And, like critics of Strauss on the Left, Gottfried implied that Strauss was not truly religious but used religion as a cover for a fundamentally nihilistic ideology.[37] In contrast, the paleo-conservatives were Burkeans: good regimes developed organically out of civilizations; the American past was superior to the American present; and religious belief was valuable because it was true, not just because it helped to maintain social stability.

The neoconservatives emerged as the winners in this intra-conservative brawl. Although the paleo-conservatives had plenty of prominent intellectuals, the neoconservatives, building on their positions in academia and the think-tanks, had greater access to money and political influence. By the end of the decade, the paleo-conservatives had formed a new group called the John Randolph Club and tried unsuccessfully to regain political influence with Patrick Buchanan's attempts to win the Republican presidential nomination in 1992 and 1996. Of course, in the neoconservative analysis, it was they

who had the better governing vision. According to Irving Kristol, there was a 'basic political impotence of traditional conservatism, which lived off Democratic errors but had no governing philosophy of its own'.[38]

Bradford himself did not seem to have had a particular animus against the neoconservatives. As late as 1986, he could still praise their role in conservatism, as former radicals who had realized that 'civic culture and the life of the arts could easily disappear from the civilized world, or lose their authority over the mass of men as did the churches during the last century'. Discussing prominent neoconservative Norman Podhoretz, Bradford wrote that 'his enemies are our enemies, if we care about the common good and have the courage to take our stand and fight in battles yet to come'.[39] Nonetheless he could still criticize them as arguing from the Left in another 1986 article, which suggested that they were too fond of the New Deal and Great Society policies. Even then, however, he wrote that traditionalists and neoconservatives 'come together in our hatred of tyranny, our preference for a rule of law, our opposition to schemes of levelling and our disposition to measure all systems by the kind of men and women nurtured by them'.[40]

William Bennett

In retrospect, Bennett's nomination as chairman of the NEH in 1981 was perhaps the first indication that at least some conservatives would go on the offensive in the educational culture war of the 1980s. Nonetheless, his background did not foreshadow how contentious his tenure would be. He was a lifelong Democrat, had a PhD in political science, had worked in academia and was the head of a humanities think-tank before his appointment to the NEH. Neither was the chairmanship of the NEH an especially high profile role; however, Bennett used his position there to criticize academia's dominant liberalism and to controversially steer the NEH in a more traditionalist and overtly patriotic direction. One of his first statements was to denounce the NEH in the *New York Times* for providing a grant (before his arrival) towards a film he described as pro-socialist propaganda. Bennett saw his new role as a chance to 'fight for the culture, the social and moral environment in which we raise our children'.[41] The NEH itself had few powers to directly control the content of university teaching, but Bennett could ensure that it gave fewer grants to left-leaning projects and more to

conservatives by appointing conservative intellectuals to its grant-making committees (including the neoconservative Gertrude Himmelfarb and the Straussian Harvey Mansfield). He went on to become US Secretary of Education from 1985 to 1988, another key position from which to fight the Culture Wars.

In 1984, the NEH published *To Reclaim a Legacy: a Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*. The book repeated arguments conservatives had been making for decades, but in this instance the impact was greater, coming as it did from a pulpit at the centre of the federal government. Writing under the auspices of and as head of the main source of federal funding for the humanities in America, Bennett's critique of American education was interesting because it came from somebody apparently in a strong position to do something about it. The report opened with the announcement that few American high school graduates begin university having received 'an adequate education in the culture and civilization of which they are members'. Clearly recognizing the difficulty of criticizing a system in which he played so prominent a part, Bennett said the fault lies with 'us' – 'by our actions, by our indifference, and by our intellectual diffidence'. The NEH study group found that many colleges had 'lost a clear sense of the purpose of the humanities', the study of Western civilization had lost its 'central place in the undergraduate curriculum', too many universities allowed students to graduate without taking any classes in European, American or classical history or culture, less than half required foreign language learning (down from almost 90 per cent in 1966) and the number of humanities majors had plummeted. These apparent problems were blamed, vaguely, on a 'failure of nerve'.[42]

The NEH report made five recommendations to 'reverse the decline': regardless of their major, all students should take a significant number of humanities courses; university presidents needed to begin by 'making plain what the institution stands for and what knowledge it regards as essential'; hiring and promotion decisions needed to be based more on quality of teaching (presumably rather than mainly on research); there needed to be a 'core of common studies'; and 'study of the humanities and western civilization must take its place at the heart of the college curriculum' (again, somewhat repetitive of earlier points). It was all quite imprecise and there was no real suggestion of how, if at all, the NEH itself would encourage (or force) colleges and universities to adopt

these recommendations. The main body of the report did go into more detail on some of these suggestions and why the humanities were so important. For example, the humanities were a 'body of knowledge and a means of inquiry that convey serious truths, defensible arguments and significant ideas. Properly taught, the humanities bring together the perennial questions of human life with the greatest works of history, literature, philosophy and art'.[43] For Bennett, America was the culmination of a process of improvement lasting millennia, the pinnacle of the West. He emphasized that America was founded on 'justice, liberty, government with the consent of the governed, and equality under the law is the result of ideas descended from the great epochs of western civilization', such as the Enlightenment, the Renaissance and 'Periclean Athens'.[44]

The report gave an extensive list of authors who should be on the core curriculum:

> [They] include, but are not limited to, the following: from classical antiquity – Homer, Sophocles, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, and Vergil; from Medieval, Renaissance, and seventeenth-century Europe – Dante, Chaucer, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Hobbes, Milton, and Locke; from eighteenth- through twentieth-century Europe – Swift, Rousseau, Austen, Wordsworth, Tocqueville, Dickens, Marx, George Eliot, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Mann, and T.S. Eliot; from American literature and historical documents – the Declaration of Independence, the *Federalist Papers*, the Constitution, the Lincoln–Douglas Debates, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Second Inauguration Address, Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Letter from the Birmingham Jail' and 'I Have a Dream…' speech, and such authors as Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner. Finally I must mention the Bible….[45]

The authors chosen were picked because they were 'great souls' and because 'to pass up the opportunity to spend time with this company is to miss a fundamental experience of higher education'. Bennett did not want to 'return to an earlier time when the classical curriculum was the only curriculum and college was available to only a privileged few', but at the same time the university needed to 'accept its vital role as

conveyor of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization'.[46] This was perhaps the fundamental disagreement between Bennett and those who wanted to update curricula – rather than view academia as something constantly adapting and changing, in which even ancient authors could be a source of challenge to be constantly re-interpreted, Bennett and some other conservatives saw them as a static, fairly simplistic, fund of examples to be learned and applied.

In 1988, whilst Secretary of Education and with an even greater level of official authority, Bennett published *Our Children, Our Country: Improving America's Schools and Affirming the Common Culture*. He began by discussing the traditional goals of education, forming both 'faculties' and 'morals' according to Jefferson, and then suggested that this view changed in the 1960s and 1970s when America 'allowed an assault on intellectual and moral standards' and 'the curriculum was "dumbed down"'.[47] One reason that Americans were learning so little about Western civilization in the 1980s was that they were being 'submerged in a mass of extraneous information, derived from disciplines like anthropology, sociology, law, economics and psychology'.[48] The result was an apparent drop in American test scores compared to foreign nations; and despite a doubling of government spending on education in the 1960s and 1970s, America 'experienced the worst education decline in our history'.[49]

Occasionally, Bennett used the 'Greeks' very loosely; teachers needed to 'shape the character of the young' because, as 'the ancient Greeks knew, the character of the entire *polis* ultimately depended on the character of its individual citizens'.[50] 'Aristotle knew, and psychologists confirm today, that it is habit which develops virtues, habit shaped not only by precept but by example as well.' Bennett then quoted Aristotle without citation (but taken from his *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.i.8), writing that "'it makes no small difference," Aristotle wrote, "whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes very great difference, or rather, all the difference".' Likewise, Plato was used to argue that schools needed to stamp out graffiti and keep tidy, well-maintained premises. 'A disorderly environment is bound to affect morale. Plato tells us in the *Republic* that the stamp of baseness on a building will sink deep into the souls of those it surrounds.'[51] Educators also needed to 'commit themselves to what Plato thought to be a civilization's most important task: the upbringing, protection and

nurture of its children'.[52] As 'we learn from Plato's *Gorgias*, no man is a citizen alone'.[53] And so on. In each case, the words of a Greek writer were cherry-picked and used as a stamp of authority with which to certify what were really very conventional ideas. Rather than learning about Socrates' intellectual scepticism, we learn from Socrates' discussion with Crito 'about respect for the law'.[54] Bennett did occasionally suggest that the Great Books were a conversation with disagreements, which somewhat contradicted his earlier focus on using them as examples in support of specific virtues. For example, he asked whether we should follow Homer or Erasmus on 'the nobility of warfare' or Aristotle or Machiavelli on 'the place of virtue in politics?' Bennett argued here that 'the case for the study of the liberal arts is not, then, a case for ideology; it is a case for philosophy and for thoughtfulness',[55] although this was not what had been described in the rest of the book. The impression left is that education for Bennett, was above all a form of inculcation in traditional values and habits.

Throughout the report, readers were reminded that America both derived from but also equalled the best that history had produced. In each case, Bennett supported his argument with three examples: one from the ancient world, one from Renaissance/Enlightenment Europe and one from America. For example, America's 'common culture also consists of great works [. . .] like the *Odyssey* and *Macbeth* and *Huckleberry Finn*'. In too many schools, students do not get the opportunity to study 'Shakespeare, or Homer, or to study closely the *Federalist*'. Teaching was 'dignified and satisfying' as was known in 'Socrates' time, in Sam Houston's time, and in Sir Thomas More's time'.[56] This pattern was applied to historical episodes as well as works of literature or philosophy. Bennett suggested that history provided the examples of moral virtue that Americans needed. For instance, to teach children about courage they would learn about 'Nathan Hale [an American soldier in the American War of Independence], about the Battle of Britain, and the siege of Thermopylae'.[57] There was a dual purpose at work here. Bennett wanted to show America that European history and culture were still worthy of study: one way to do that was to give examples from Greece/Europe that compared to America. At the same time, he did not want to be perceived as saying that Greece and Europe were superior to America. The solution was to supplement every example from Antiquity and Europe with an American counterpart to show that America really was

the worthy heir and apex of the Western tradition. Despite all the criticism of American education and America's declining international test scores, he was still careful to bang the patriotic drum occasionally: 'For all its deficiencies, ours is the world's greatest system of higher education.'[58] In referring to America's role in the world, he cut out the middle example (Europe) and drew direct comparison between Athens and America: 'Pericles could say that Athens was the education of Hellas; in our day, it is the West – the United States especially – to which much of the world looks for guidance, hope, and inspiration [. . .] the western political order is the best the world has seen.'[59]

In political terms, Bennett still seemed to wish to chart a neoconservative middle ground between traditional conservatives, who emphasized the right curriculum but did not pay enough attention to 'the education of the disadvantaged', and liberals, who advocated ending discrimination but made the mistake of assuming that 'disadvantaged children need an education that is different from the education of others'. It was disadvantaged children who were 'harmed the most' by schools' post-sixties emphasis on freedom and 'value-free' teaching. He identified three features common to successful schools: traditional methods of teaching, an approach to education from a 'distinctly anti-relativist point of view' and an emphasis on teaching all pupils, whatever their background, the same (i.e. no special help or different lessons for students from poor households or ethnic minorities). In doing this, these schools were 'realizing the sound liberal goals of the sixties and seventies'.[60] He echoed Strauss on the harm caused by value-free social science in America's Cold War with the USSR by telling a story of a teacher who asked his students to talk about the differences between the USA and the USSR and found that the students had a good factual knowledge but that only two out of 53 students thought that the USA was 'morally superior' to the USSR. Bennett found it disturbing that 'the greatest nation on earth', with 'political and individual freedom unequalled anywhere in any time', should be raising its children to 'regard the values of a totalitarian police state as morally commensurate with its own'. He then alluded to the story of Horatius, asking how many Americans in value-free environments would stand on the bridge 'when the time comes';[61] an oddly fatalistic comment considering the context of United States/USSR cooperation in the period of *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*.

Values 'are not matters of mere personal taste' (though he did not explain why not) and 'the formation of character and the achievement of moral literacy' were 'what we really should be about'.[62] He also wanted to argue that his apparently traditionalist curriculum was really allied with genuinely liberal aims. So, for example, he rhetorically asked 'what do the writings of Plato and Aristotle, Greek philosophers who lived and taught more than two thousand years ago, have to do with the plight of a young black American growing up under Jim Crow in the middle of the twentieth century?' The answer was that Martin Luther King studied the Greek philosophers 'because he needed to know the answers to certain questions. What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended?' Greek knowledge helped King to ensure that 'Jim Crow was destroyed and American history was transformed'.[63] In the end, like Strauss, Bennett adopted the conservative attitude that America was engaged in a struggle in which the ability to inculcate American values in its young could spell the difference between victory and defeat. America must 'study, value and defend the West' because 'the West is under attack'. The attackers included those 'so taken in by relativism that they doubt the preferability of civilization to savagery, of democracy to totalitarianism'.[64]

Bennett ended by admitting that the Reagan revolution was incomplete. 'Ronald Reagan has given us a government worthy of the American people's respect and trust', but America's 'social and cultural institutions' were not 'worthy of the American people'. The renaissance of America's cultural institutions had been begun and 'the Reagan revolution extends beyond tax reform and a stronger defense to a recovery of our national purpose, a reaffirmation of our common cultural beliefs'.[65] However, the fact that Bennett could write such a critical book towards the end of Reagan's presidency shows how little had been achieved by cultural conservatives during his first seven years in office.

Allan Bloom

Conservative writers like Kirk and Nisbet had been writing for a fairly small audience on the Right. Even Bennett, with his PhD and the added authority acquired through his positions in government, could not claim to be basing his critique on recent, firsthand experience within academia; and his analyses were often as simplistic as his appropriations of Greek

thought. However, the startling publishing triumph of 1987, Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, suffered none of these handicaps. Bloom was a longstanding university professor at Chicago and the work was both erudite and well written. The liveliness of its style is perhaps the greatest revelation once we learn that Bloom was a Straussian – the book contains some of the nuance we might expect from a student of Strauss's, but its secrets were not ensnared within the usual thickets of near-impenetrable prose. Nonetheless, one of Strauss's major concerns in his writings had been 'to raise the status and reform the character of liberal education'[66] and Bloom was continuing that task. *Closing* was written from the perspective of a teacher and Bloom was careful to emphasize the authority this gave him as a critic. As a teacher he had an 'attention to the young, knowing what their hungers are and what they can digest'.[67]

Bloom on Relativism

For Bloom, the key criterion on which to judge any generation was 'in its relation to the permanent concerns of mankind'.[68] The phrase 'permanent concerns' reminds us of the 'permanent problems' of his teacher, Leo Strauss. For Strauss, the 'permanent problems' seemed like another way of saying 'permanent truths' and he seemed like another conservative defender of moral absolutes against relativism. But seeming is not the same as being. In Strauss's case, the attack on relativism was not followed by a defence of moral absolutes, leading to questions about Strauss's real position. Similar questions occur to the reader of *The Closing of the American Mind*. In Bloom's experience, 'there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative [. . .] that anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them'. According to Bloom, his students were unified in 'their relativism and in their allegiance to equality, and the two are related in a moral intention. The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate, the condition of a free society [. . .] the danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance.' Bloom wrote that all educational systems had a moral goal and in America that goal was openness, whereas before the 1960s the old goal had been inculcating a belief in those natural rights which supported the American constitution. The old system promoted 'a fundamental basis of

unity and sameness', but the new education had rejected natural rights in favour of openness, with the result that 'there is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything'. However, 'when there are no shared goals or vision of the public good, is the social contract any longer possible?'[69]

Echoes of, hints at and direct references to Greek, and especially Platonic, philosophy permeate the work. The 'awareness of the good as such and the desire to possess it' were fundamental recurring themes. If the young were taught that there was no such thing as the good, they would have no higher purpose to aim for. Thus, by teaching openness, universities really taught closedness. Genuine openness meant believing that the good existed and then measuring real society against that template. For Bloom, this was what 'Plato meant to show by the image of the cave in the *Republic* and by representing us as prisoners within it. A culture is a cave', but Plato 'did not suggest going around to other cultures as a solution to the limitations of the cave. Nature should be the standard by which we judge our own lives'. Bloom criticized the motives of anthropologists, arguing that 'only dogmatic assurance that thought is culture-bound, that there is no nature [. . .] is what makes our educators so certain that the only way to escape the limitations of our time and place is to study other cultures'. Bloom at this point suggested that 'history and anthropology were understood by the Greeks to be useful only in discovering what the past and other peoples had to contribute to the discovery of nature. Historians and anthropologists were to put peoples and their conventions to the test, as Socrates did individuals, and go beyond them.' However, Bloom did not quote these anthropologists who went around measuring other peoples against an objective measure of goodness. Accordingly, 'openness used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason's power.' The 'latest attempts to grasp the human situation – cultural relativism, historicism, the fact–value distinction – are the suicide of science [. . .] openness to closedness is what we teach'. In contrast, Bloom argued that 'the fact there have been different opinions about good and bad in different times and places in no way proves that none is true or superior to others'.[70] However, neither does it prove the reverse. His contentions that relativism had negative effects were dazzling, but if he had a valid argument that the

good exists, rather than simply an argument that belief in the good had a positive effect, then its absence is puzzling.

This critique of relativism was Bloom's overriding theme. He gave a detailed discussion of the three waves of modernity outlined by Strauss, but went further in outlining how relativism had made the leap from the arcane works of Nietzsche, popularized through the works of Freud and Weber, to a mass ideology capable of infecting all of American society. According to Bloom, German philosophy had been popularized in America to the extent that 'Max Weber's technical sociological terminology' had become the routine language of the American populace and American life had become a 'Disneyland version of the Weimar Republic'. The habitual use of Weimar Germany as the doom-laden metaphor of choice for Straussians should be noted. The Weimar comparison hinted at the eventual fate of a relativist America, but it might have seemed a little far-fetched in the 1980s. Perhaps in an effort to stave off this inevitable scepticism, Bloom gave a number of examples of decadent Weimar culture which were polluting America. For example, the popular song 'Mack the Knife' was adopted from the Weimar song 'Mackie Messer', which was itself apparently based upon a character in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* who 'lusted after "the joy of the knife"';[71] and the youth term 'stay loose' (meaning 'relax') was apparently a translation of Heidegger's *gelassenheit*. Bloom quoted Marx's dictum about history repeating as tragedy and then farce to say that the 1960s' upheavals were the repetition of what had happened in Germany under Nazism in the 1930s.[72] In adopting German philosophy, Americans were like 'savages who, having been discovered and evangelized by missionaries, have converted to Christianity' despite only a superficial understanding.[73] This reference to Americans as savages was one of the book's hints that it was not simply paean to an older American greatness.

Bloom included an account of the development of modern political thought which closely followed Strauss's account in *Natural Right and History*. Like Bennett and other philosophers, Bloom argued that the Greeks made key developments in Western thought. But where Bennett then sought to emphasize continuity between Greece and America, using early modern Europe as a convenient stop along the road, Bloom only saw a decline in standards between the ancients and the moderns. For the Greeks the regime had been the essence of the *polis*, not its

culture, but in modernity the opposite was true. Thucydides' Pericles had lauded the Athenian regime (rather than Athenian culture); 'the Athenians are the political heroes who surpass those in Homer, and the arts are implicitly understood to be imitations and adornments of that heroism'. In contrast, moderns tended to subsume politics into what was lower than it (economics) or higher than it (culture).[74]

For Bloom, it was a mistake to view Enlightenment thinkers as optimists who expected a 'simple triumph of reason'. Instead, they were Machiavellian: 'it was not by forgetting about the evil in man that they hoped to better his lot but by giving way to it rather than opposing it, by lowering standards [. . .] selfishness was to be the common good'.[75] So, again, he reaffirmed the Straussian themes of moderns rejecting virtue in favour of freedom and of Machiavelli being a 'teacher of evil'.[76] Modernity was not the result of large, impersonal forces, but of a small group of Enlightenment thinkers, and, rather than something unexpected, 'the vulgarity of modern society [. . .] was something the philosophers were willing to live with'.[77] They had to believe that science was good for society, which the ancient world did not accept. In consequence, the ancient philosophers had to write esoterically because they believed that science harmed society by undermining the irrational conventions necessary for society to flourish. The Enlightenment thinkers started from the same place as Plato in believing there to be a cave of false opinions imprisoning society. However, Plato thought only a few could escape it and that the *demos* could not manage without the cave of false opinion (since 'the unwise could not recognize the wise', the wise would have to be masters of controlling false opinion to achieve beneficial ends). In contrast, Enlightenment thinkers supposedly thought that, by lowering their goals for virtue, all could achieve it and the false images could be disposed of for all. This was the crux of the ancient/modern disagreement.[78]

According to Bloom, Plato's *Apology* showed us that 'the political problem for the philosopher is the gods'. Echoing Kendall from a generation earlier, Bloom contended that Socrates, in not fleeing Athens after being sentenced to death, 'accepts the city's right to demand his belief'. Socrates' argument that he was not really undermining the gods was, according to Bloom, 'insincere'. Plato showed in the *Republic* that the only solution to the dilemma would be if philosophers become kings, but in fact the meaning of the *Republic* was 'ironic and

impossible'. The 'important thing is not speaking one's mind, but finding a way to have one's own mind'.[79] Plato's lesson was that philosophers needed to write esoterically. All ancient philosophers practised esoteric writing that tailored the exoteric content of their words to the prevailing regimes in which they lived. Accordingly, 'the form and content of the writings of men like Plato, Cicero, Farabi and Maimonides appear very different, while their inner teachings may be to all intents and purposes the same'.[80] In contrast, the Enlightenment thinkers took Socrates too seriously and tried to put the *Republic* into effect. The 'Enlightenment is Socrates respected and free to study what he wants, and thereby it is civil society reconstituted'. The 'experience Socrates represents is important because it is the soul of the university'. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates was found guilty of corrupting the young and believing in gods of his own invention. Defendants were allowed to propose their own punishment and Socrates defiantly asked that the penalty for his 'crime' be that he be fed for life at the city's expense.[81] In Bloom's account, Socrates' insolent request had finally been granted: 'what is the modern university, with its pay and tenure, other than a free lunch for philosophy and scientists?'[82]

However, Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers represented only the first wave of modernity, where ancient natural right was replaced by modern natural right. Eventually, Heidegger and Nietzsche undermined early modern rationalism and dismantled modern natural right, but they were unable to replace it with anything except nihilism. According to Straussians like Bloom, Heidegger and Nietzsche did not appreciate that Socratic rationalism and classic natural right might have offered a viable alternative to modern natural right. To avoid their mistake, we now needed to turn back to the true, secret teachings of Plato in order to rebuild the foundations of rationalism. The problems with contemporary universities in America were due to this modern lack of belief in natural right, which led to a more profound lack of faith in the vocation of universities. This lack of belief had been experienced earlier by Heidegger when he had committed himself to Nazism in his *Rektoratsrede*. Accordingly, we return again to Weimar: 'what happened to the universities in Germany in the 1930s is what has happened and is happening everywhere'. Consequently, 'contemplation of Socrates is our most urgent task' to save them.[83]

Besides occasional flourishes like the description of America's pop culture borrowings from Weimar Germany, Bloom's account owed almost everything to Strauss. His analysis of the problems with the American university, especially its relativism, and his advocacy of a return to Plato as the way out of the crisis, come straight from Strauss. Fellow Straussian Harry Jaffa observed that 'Strauss's words and Strauss's thoughts echo throughout this book',[84] though it contains only one, seemingly insignificant, reference to Strauss.[85] But whereas Bloom seemed to be writing about university education in its entirety, Strauss was 'almost solely concerned with the goal or end of education at its best or highest – of the education of the perfect prince, as it were'.[86] Nonetheless, this difference becomes more apparent than real as we delve deeper into Bloom's work.

Bloom on the Sixties

Bloom's description of the 1960s campus unrest was strikingly similar to Tarcov's. He first described his reactions to events at Cornell (where he was then teaching, but left for Chicago shortly afterwards). As early as 1969, in 'The Democratization of the University', he had complained that the modern university was a failed 'attempt to establish a center for reflection and education independent of the regime and the pervasive influence of its principles'. Modern government-funded universities had 'tried to disprove the Socratic contention that he who shares bed and board with the rulers, be they kings or peoples, would soon have to share their tastes and way of life, and that thus the thinker must separate himself in heart and mind from the currents of party passion in order to liberate himself from prejudice'. Bloom saw universities as the determinants of the direction society would take, but the universities had 'become a battleground between liberal democracy and radical, one might say, totalitarian egalitarianism'.[87] He quoted Plato to argue that 'the young in their turn exacerbate the weaknesses of democracy and impel it toward anarchy and ultimately tyranny'. For Bloom, Plato had already described the 1960s in the *Republic*:

> As the teacher in such a situation is frightened of the pupils and fawns on them, so the students make light of their teachers, as well as their attendants. And, generally, the young copy their elders and compete with them in speeches and deeds while the old come

> down to the level of the young; imitating the young, they are overflowing with facility and charm, and that's so that they won't seem to be unpleasant or despotic.[88]

The consequences of the student revolts and the universities' surrender were clear: 'the serious study of classic literature will be sacrificed'. Bloom's fear was that if students were free to study as they wished, they would choose the easiest and most gratifying courses open to them. Furthermore, it was a mistake to help students feel good about themselves because 'self-contempt is the basis of self-improvement'. Without firm direction, students become the democratic citizens Plato described, and he gave Plato's description of such a man as a description of the modern student:

> he doesn't admit [...] if someone says that there are some pleasures belonging to fine and good desires and some belonging to bad desires [...] He shakes his head at all this and says that all are alike and must be honored on an equal basis [...] He lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastics, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and, jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him.[89]

This attitude had not significantly changed almost 20 years later when Bloom wrote *The Closing of the American Mind*. He described the 1969 riots at Cornell – 'the professors, the repositories of our best traditions and highest intellectual aspirations, were fawning over what was nothing better than a rabble [...] expressing their willingness to change the university's goals and the content of what they taught'. The inability of the faculty to stand up for themselves was not due to their inherent cowardice, but was the result of the triumph of relativism in American intellectual thought. Again invoking Weimar Germany, Bloom wrote that 'the value crisis in philosophy made the university prey to whatever intense passion moved the masses'. That the students may have had reasonable grounds for complaint was not entertained.

Bloom was also capable of using the figure of Socrates as an exemplar of moral virtues, in a similar vein to Bennett. Bloom contrasted spineless modern academics with Socrates, who resisted the Athenian *demos* when it wanted to execute the generals after the sea battle of Arginousae and defied Athens' tyrants when they ordered him to arrest an innocent man.[90]

Sex, Race and... Rock and Roll

The publication of *The Closing of the American Mind* aroused a great deal of publicity, much of it hostile. Bloom later claimed to be shocked by the antagonism which his work engendered in critics and the accusations against himself of homophobia, misogyny, elitism and racism. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine how the response to his discussion of race could have surprised him. He first argued, in a relatively moderate tone, that blacks since the 1960s had rejected integration in favour of separation, but 'the black studies programs largely failed because what was serious in them did not interest the students, and the rest was unprofitable hokum'. Nonetheless, the influence of black power had persisted and had resulted in,

> quotas in admission, a shadow of the university life, preference in financial assistance, racially motivated hiring of faculty, difficulty in giving blacks failing marks, and an organized system of grievance and feeling aggrieved. And everywhere hypocrisy, contempt-producing lies about what is going on and how the whole scheme is working.[91]

This was followed by the comment that 'the average black student's achievements do not equal those of the average white student in the good universities, and everybody knows it'. A charitable interpreter might suggest that Bloom's point was not that blacks were inherently inferior but that opening up university places to students who had suffered poorer educational upbringings was treating the symptom rather than the underlying problem. Some such students, thrust into an elite environment without sufficient preparation, would either fail or would necessitate just such a relaxation of standards that Bloom described in order to get them through to the end of their studies. But Bloom did not make such a case. On even the most generous interpretation, the

language employed showed a lack of sensitivity and certainly none of the nuance he employed elsewhere.

Bloom seemed most like a traditionalist conservative when critiquing the modern project for undermining families (though, as we shall see, this criticism needs to be read through the lens of Bloom's Straussian esotericism). A view of the nation as 'a community of families is a formula that until recently worked very well' and the idea of the family as an intermediate unit between the state and the individual was integral to the theories of Hobbes and Locke. However, 'it is very questionable whether this solution is viable over the long run' because it draws on two contrary ideas. In ancient political philosophy, such as 'Aristotle's *Politics*, the subpolitical or prepolitical family relations point to the necessity of political rule and are perfected by it', whereas in the modern state-of-nature teachings, 'political rule is derived entirely from the need for protection of individuals'. The problem was that if we were viewed primarily as individuals, 'persons are free to construct whatever relations they please'; but if we were primarily defined by families, then 'a preexisting frame largely determines the relations of men and women'. In Bloom's version, the ancients were more like a hive and the moderns a herd: in the hive there was a 'division of labor and a product towards which they all work in common', whereas in the herd, they 'may need a shepherd, but each of the animals is grazing for itself and can easily be separated from the herd'. Bloom left open a conclusion between these competing tendencies, suggesting it was another of Strauss's 'permanent problems': for Bloom, 'the tension between freedom and attachment, and attempts to achieve the impossible union between the two, are the permanent condition of man'.[92]

Women had a natural desire for children that could only be suppressed with difficulty and men, according to Bloom, did not; in loosening social bonds, women were finding that they still wanted children but that they could not compel men to have the children and then support them.[93] On marriage, he echoed the neoconservative social scientists in supporting it for its social function rather than focusing upon an inherent moral benefit for the couple: 'the decomposition of this bond is surely America's most urgent social problem'. He then made an argument that the children of divorced parents tended to have 'a certain deformity of the spirit' which made them 'not as open to the serious study of philosophy' as others. They tended to build 'rigid frameworks of

right and wrong' which were only a 'thin veneer over boundless seas of rage, doubt and fear'. Since there was a 'natural superiority of the philosophic life', this was clearly a tragedy to Bloom.[94] He did accept the equal ability of women to take part in what he considered the highest human activity (philosophy), but his focus on the negative consequences of women's liberation implies a preference for more traditional gender roles. The implication was that women should sacrifice their newly gained equality for the good of all, whilst there was no indication that men could or should sacrifice anything.

Besides Bloom's criticism of racial and gender changes since the 1960s, he included a chapter on the effect of popular music. He asserted that music was more important to the 1980s generation than those preceding them, which was itself a positive development, but that the type of music they listened to contributed still further to their closed-mindedness. One positive of the 1980s generation was that they took 'seriously [...] the famous passages on musical education in the *Republic*'. This was a reference to the section in which Plato's Socrates suggested that certain types of music would need to be banned in his ideal society.[95] In contrast to earlier generations, which had criticized this section of the *Republic* for its support of censorship but had found the stress on music a little odd, the students of the 1980s knew 'exactly why Plato takes music so seriously. They know it affects life very profoundly and are indignant because Plato wants to rob them of their most intimate pleasure'. Their 'fury shows how much Plato threatens what is dear and intimate to them' and this was good because if the student could then draw back and 'come to doubt the ultimate value of what he loves, he has taken the first and most difficult step toward the philosophic conversion'. Bloom went on to describe what Plato meant in his critique of music, arguing that it was 'the barbarous expression of the soul'. It was 'not only not reasonable' but it was 'hostile to reason'. Education should be 'the taming or domestication of the soul's raw passions – not suppressing or excising them, which would deprive the soul of its energy – but forming and informing them as art'. Reason and philosophy could provide consolation, but students could not understand that and 'can only see it as a disciplinary and repressive parent. But they do see, in the case of Plato, that that parent has figured out what they are up to.'[96]

In his discussion of music we see evidence for a critic's comment that Nietzsche was 'at once hero and villain, astute cultural critic of bourgeois culture in the abstract, but nefarious corrupter of American youth in practice'.[97] For Bloom, Nietzsche had been in agreement with Plato in seeking to make music 'serve a higher purpose'. The importance of a musical education was recognized by the ancients, including Aristotle, whose *Politics* contained key sections[98] concerning musical education. Bloom argued, ignoring the censorship in the *Republic*, that ancient philosophy persuaded but did not censor musicians. Even if we accept the Straussian position that the *Republic* was largely ironic, philosophers were never put in a political position where they could censor music in reality, so it is unclear what Bloom meant here. Like most problems for Bloom, the genesis of modernity's damaging approach to music occurred in the works of 'Hobbes, Locke and Smith', who thought they had 'discovered other ways to deal with the irrational part of the soul'. Only Rousseau and Nietzsche took music seriously, but they departed from Plato because they wanted to excite and revitalize the irrational part of the soul, not to discipline it. This was 'the significance of rock music'. It has no great intellectual sources, but it has risen 'in an atmosphere in which there is no intellectual resistance to attempts to tap the rawest passions'. Modern music 'has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire – not love, not *eros*, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored [. . .] young people know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse'.[99]

To Bloom, modern music contained 'three great lyrical themes: sex, hate and a smarmy, hypocritical version of brotherly love'. Even a

> glance at the videos that project images on the wall of Plato's cave since MTV took it over suffices to prove this. Hitler's image recurs frequently enough in exciting context to give one pause. Nothing noble, sublime, profound, delicate, tasteful or even decent can find a place in such tableaux. There is room only for the intense, changing, crude and immediate.[100]

In one of the work's stranger passages, Bloom asked the reader to 'picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home'. This boy was the culmination of centuries of political and technological progress, but the only result was that his 'body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of

onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag queen who makes the music'. In summary, 'life is made into a non-stop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy'. Nonetheless, Bloom's critique diverged from other assaults on popular music developed by conservatives. He did not complain about popular music because it corrupted morals, but because it 'ruins the imagination of young people and makes it very difficult for them to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education'.[101] This was one of a number of hints that he was not quite the conventional conservative perceived by many supporters and critics. The comment that modern students apparently did not experience love and certainly not 'the divine madness Socrates praised' and that 'there is almost no remaining link visible to them between what they learn in sex education and Plato's *Symposium*'[102] could perhaps be read as a lament for old-fashioned love. But his real fear was not that popular music led to promiscuity and that promiscuity was morally wrong. His greatest fear was that after his students had slipped off their 'Michael Jackson costumes' they would end up as bourgeois professionals in suits.[103]

Bloom on the Great Books

Even before the campus revolution of the late 1960s, Bloom had been complaining that 'the civilizing and unifying function of the peoples' books [. . .] seems to be dying a rapid death'. The absence of a canon of books to 'form their taste' was the 'most striking thing about contemporary university students'.[104] Consequently, his 1980s ascription of higher education's ills to the changes enacted in the late 1960s, and in particular the reduction in Great Books courses, should be viewed with scepticism. He was also repeating arguments which had been going back and forth since the nineteenth century, in his attacks on over-specialization. According to Bloom, the modern university no longer presented a 'distinctive visage' but instead appeared to students as 'an anarchy, because there are no recognized rules for citizenship and no legitimate titles to rule'. There was no vision of what an educated person should be. Out of this 'chaos' students emerged dispirited and they then discarded liberal education in favour of specialization towards a professional career.[105]

Like those other critics of specialization, Weaver and Nock, Bloom attributed much of the problem to America's over-fondness for equality. To Bloom, equality seemed 'to culminate in the unwillingness and incapacity to make claims of superiority, particularly in the domains in which such claims have always been made – art, religion and philosophy'. The problems in academia reflected 'a crisis at the peaks of learning, an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude, which constitutes the crisis of our civilization'. Without being able to make claims for superiority, 'the university has nothing to say' to students looking for guidance. For such students the modern answer was breadth – to provide lots of courses from different areas. But in Bloom's view this was superficial because these courses did not really 'point beyond themselves' or give students the 'independent means to pursue permanent questions independently, as, for example, the study of Aristotle or Kant once did'. For Bloom, the only answer was a return to Great Books courses, 'in which a liberal education means reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them – not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read'.[106]

In a paper published after his death, Bloom wrote that *Closing* had given 'qualified and highly nuanced praise to the Great Books curriculum promoted by the former president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins'.[107] The praise was certainly balanced with criticism: he described 'the Great Books cult' as 'amateurish'. For Bloom, it encouraged

> an autodidact's self-assurance without competence; one cannot read all of the Great Books carefully; if one reads only Great Books, one can never know what a great, as opposed to an ordinary, book is; there is no way of determining who is to decide what a Great Book or what the canon is; books are made the ends and not the means; the whole movement has a coarse evangelistic tone that is the opposite of good taste; it engenders a spurious intimacy with greatness; and so forth.[108]

Yet he continued that, wherever the Great Books held sway, 'students are excited and satisfied, feel they are doing something that is independent and fulfilling, getting something from the university they cannot get elsewhere'. A 'good course of liberal education feeds the student's love of truth and passion to live a good life'.[109] As a corollary of relativism, the Classics were no longer considered repositories of 'true' knowledge and therefore 'practically no one even tries to read them as they were once read – for the sake of finding out whether they are true'. Thus, classicists turn to Aristotle's *Ethics* because it teaches not 'what a good man is but what the Greeks thought about morality. But who really cares very much about that? Not any normal person who wants to lead a serious life'. Thus the humanities were 'the exposed part of the university' having been 'buffeted more severely by historicism and relativism' than the social or natural sciences. In response, humanists had been 'desperate to make their subjects accord with modernity instead of a challenge to it'.[110] To Bloom, this undermined the whole point of the humanities.

Bloom was more explicit than Strauss in drawing attention to the primacy that philosophy ought to take over society. Like Strauss, he held that philosophy was the highest activity in life. Discussing Plato's *Symposium*, Bloom wrote that 'it requires much thought to learn that this thinking might be what it is all for. That's where we are beginning to fail.' And if philosophy was life's highest goal, then society really existed to maximize the opportunities for people to pursue philosophical enquiry. Society's problems needed to take second place to allowing the university to carry on as it wished, not, as the sixties radicals wanted, for the university to be an engine of change for the improvement of society. To some extent, Bloom echoed Nisbet here. Bloom continued, 'the real community of man [. . .] is the community of those who seek the truth'. These will be 'only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good. Their common concern for the good linked them.'[111] This focus on 'the few' led to justified accusations of elitism.

According to Bloom, the 1980s were 'the American moment in world history [. . .] just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities'.[112] Coming near the end of a book which had excoriated the state of American universities, this statement did not bode well for mankind. Bloom did have some

apparently positive things to write about America. America had 'one of the longest uninterrupted political traditions of any nation in the world' and that tradition 'tells one story: the unbroken, ineluctable progress of freedom and equality'. But the quest for ever-greater equality was also strongly criticized at other points in the work. And Bloom's faint praise continued: 'our heroes and the language of the Declaration contribute to a national reverence for our Constitution' which 'provides a superior moral significance to humdrum lives'. It would be difficult to find a self-proclaimed conservative intellectual who justified the American Constitution based on its ability to help people find value in their dull lives. However, Bloom still wrote in defence of America's feel-good Constitution, with its 'unity, grandeur and attendant folklore', that had been under attack from 'so many directions in the last half-century that it gradually disappeared from daily life'. The result of these attacks was supposedly that relativist 'openness [...] has driven out the local deities'.[113]

Bloom related that he often asked new students who their heroes were and usually received no response. The students were following a 'channel first established in the *Republic* by Socrates, who liberated himself from Achilles'.[114] On the face of it, this sounded either like criticism of Socrates or praise of Bloom's Socratic students, until we remember that what was right for a philosopher (in this case, radical scepticism) was not right for normal people (who needed myths to find 'significance in humdrum lives'). Hence, once again, Bloom recommended something that would appeal to conservatives (respect for the American tradition) based on underlying arguments that such a conservative would abhor. Likewise, America's special need for heroes was necessary to counteract the influence of the middle class. As far back as 1969 Bloom had been scathing about the pre-university lives of his students. He had suggested that making university courses relevant to students was a mistake because students arrived at university as philistines. 'This is particularly true in America where nothing in students' past or the world outside the university attests to the significance, or even the existence, of these rare and fine things.'[115] By 1987 the criticism was usually better hidden, but comments on the need for exemplars of nobility did at least imply that in America such exemplars were especially needed. America needed heroes because 'we have only the bourgeoisie, and the love of the heroic is one of the few counterpoises available to us. In us the contempt for the heroic is

only an extension of the perversion of the democratic principle that denies greatness and wants everyone to feel comfortable in his skin without having to suffer unpleasant comparisons.' Americans, instead of being freer without heroes like 'Cyrus, Theseus, Moses or Romulus [. . .] unconsciously act out the roles of the doctors, lawyers, businessmen or TV personalities around them'. As a result, they were 'artificially restrained from the enthusiasm for great virtue'.[116]

A Conservative Bloom?

As we saw earlier, Bloom's great fear about rock music was that it would dull the senses of the young to such an extent that philosophy would be ignored in favour of a tedious bourgeois existence. Similarly, the aspects of life usually most lauded by conservatives did not rank highly in Bloom's value system. He may have echoed familiar conservative tropes on the Great Books and Western civilization, but a description of a student's pre- and post-university life as 'the intellectual wasteland he has left behind and the inevitable dreary professional training that awaits him after' would make many pro-family and pro-business conservatives uncomfortable. For Bloom, a student's university years were 'civilization's only chance to get to him' and show him some higher potential.[117] Once again, the blame for modern America's dull, bourgeois nature lay with Hobbes and Locke, who had based their philosophies on the practical fear of death. In contrast, Plato had taught a nobler philosophy and 'would have united with Rousseau against the bourgeois in his insistence on the essential humanness of longing for the good, as opposed to careful avoidance of the bad'.[118]

As a Straussian, it should come as no surprise that Bloom actually seemed to agree with the relativists he attacked qua the truth of their attacks. Bloom wrote that 'country, religion, family, ideas of civilization, all the sentimental and historical forces that stood between cosmic infinity and the individual, providing some notion of a place within the whole, have been rationalized and have lost their compelling force'.[119] This could be read as a defence of the truthfulness of those 'forces'; but no justification was given for their truthfulness and the inclusion of 'sentimental' suggests that they were not based upon reason. The suspicion is that Bloom did not believe in those things himself. This is another example of a Straussian wanting these things to retain their force for other, lesser, people, whilst doubting their inherent truthfulness.

The paradox for Bloom was that he supported the 'folklore' surrounding America's founding because it gave meaning to people's lives, but he also considered it a Lockean enterprise which was responsible for the present state of the bourgeois, philistine America he abhorred.[120] As Drury has pointed out,[121] this was the key reason for the attacks on *The Closing of the American Mind* from some fellow Straussians. As we saw in Chapter 3, Harry Jaffa interpreted the American Constitution as a classical enterprise which had been 'completed' by the Socratic Lincoln, making America a bastion of 'classic' natural right. As we might expect then, Jaffa's review of *Closing* was critical of Bloom's implicit criticism of America. He first made the point that Bloom's 'American Mind' turned out to be a mind entirely formed from European sources, rather than America's actual founders. Jaffa argued that the Founders were 'morally and politically wise men in practice', the 'kind of characters from whom Aristotle himself drew his portraits of the moral and political virtues' rather than from 'abstract speculation'. For him, 'the vitality of classical political philosophy' was that it was 'grounded in the reality of political life' and this was why it was 'so close to the statesmanship of the American Founding'. According to Jaffa, Bloom's account was tainted by anti-American snobbishness, to the extent that he could not 'form or accept an opinion about the United States that has not come to him from a European source'.[122] A number of other reviewers picked up on Bloom's apparent anti-Americanism. After summarizing Bloom's elitist opposition to American art forms like jazz, his anti-feminism and his views on education, Drury concluded that 'Bloom's Straussian education fills him with repugnance for everything American'[123] and Robert Pattison observed that 'the book's success testifies to America's enduring affection for works that belittle the national intelligence'.[124]

Bloom's ambiguous attitude towards America prompts us to question the central issue in his work: relativism. In Jaffa's review, he expressed unhappiness that Bloom did not talk about Strauss, especially when Bloom mentioned Heidegger as the one modern for whom 'the study of Greek philosophy became truly central'. Jaffa found this neglect 'incomprehensible' and tantamount to 'speaking of Hitler without speaking of Churchill'. Bloom had 'no intention of facing squarely the issue of philosophical realism (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) versus nihilism (Nietzsche and Heidegger)' because he knew that Strauss

'presented the case for the former in terms he cannot refute but will not accept'.[125] As we saw in Chapter 2, Strauss was actually just as ambiguous as Bloom in his defence of objective moral truths. As William Galston has pointed out, Strauss had asserted that natural right had been undermined by reason, but he had only expressed a more tentative 'inclination to prefer' natural right over relativism. According to Galston, whilst 'relativism is poison, neither modern nor classical natural right teachings are straightforwardly available as antidotes'.[126] This is the unspoken dilemma at the heart of *Closing*.

What is interesting about Jaffa's review is the example he gave to show both that Bloom was in essence a relativist and that such relativism led to moral turpitude. In the middle of his review, he began criticizing Bloom for not addressing the most dangerous modern symptom of relativism: homosexuality. According to Jaffa, 'the demand for the recognition of sodomy as both a moral and a legal right represents the most complete repudiation – theoretical as well as practical – of all objective standards of human conduct'.[127] This digression seemed to come from nowhere, but his point was that Bloom's attacks on modern decadence had ignored its biggest symptom: the movement for gay rights. Four hostile paragraphs followed on this seemingly irrelevant subject before Jaffa pointed out that

> the chronology of the AIDS epidemic corresponds precisely with the public movement to establish sodomy and lesbianism as a recommended lifestyle. In nothing has the power of relativism – and the disgrace of American higher education – manifested itself more than in its endorsement of homosexuality.[128]

In Jaffa's account, the AIDS epidemic gave moralists one last opportunity to promote virtuous conduct before a cure was found. There was a race on 'between God and science'. According to Jaffa, Bloom wrote 'eloquently and even wisely of the dangers of relativism', but 'having eloquently portrayed the disastrous consequences of relativism he does not advocate a return to those standards of human conduct implied in its rejection'.[129] For obvious reasons, Jaffa did not attempt to cite Greek authorities in his denunciation of Bloom's soft stance against homosexuality. What is perhaps surprising is that Bloom himself was gay; but if Jaffa knew that (and they had known each other

for decades as fellow Straussians, even writing a book together in 1964, so it seems likely), this must rank as a thinly veiled personal attack on Bloom.

The paleo-conservative Paul Gottfried described the work as a 'Straussian picture of gloomy and progressive decadence'. 'The ancients, Plato and Aristotle, are praised for talking about virtue and truth – although it is never clear whether Bloom believes in either.' In Gottfried's view, Bloom was not simply a shaky defender of absolutist morality, but also somebody who 'welcomes the spread of modern progressive ideals as the actualization of both American and European revolutionary movements'. To Gottfried, Bloom was a modern who identified 'with the Left, rationalism, Enlightenment, liberal (and even social) democracy'. The problem as Gottfried saw it was that Bloom had embraced progressivism but was unhappy when it resulted in 'undisciplined students, jarring popular music, and falling educational standards'. 'Unfortunately, Bloom can never quite bring himself to recognize the close ties between his religion of democracy cum philosophical scepticism and the cultural trends he deplores.'[130]

As we have seen, debates over the purposes and practice of higher education were especially heated in this period. The privileged place of Classics within American education, especially in the Great Books curricula, and Greece's role at the foundation of Western thought, made the Greeks a centre of contestation. Even conservatives like Kirk, with apparently little interest and some disdain for Greek thought, had to make at least passing reference. The need for ancient Greek support has been especially necessary for the Right. Whilst not labelled 'the stupid party' like their British counterparts, their minority status in academia and the dearth of nationally, let alone internationally, successful conservative intellectuals made it much more important for conservatives to assert their authority when commenting on the state of education. So, one reason the Greeks continued to be invoked in educational debates was simply the prestige of Antiquity – in spite of Americans' powerful desire for 'the new', respect for the authority of 'the old' showed no signs of dying out. The first in anything gains prestige and being the first in philosophy to have asked questions which seemed to be the same questions asked today, made the Greeks an obvious place to turn when a writer wanted to lend authority to his argument.

Returning to politics, the neoconservative takeover of the Right was also evident in these debates. In contrast to the works of the 1950s, in which an explicitly elitist agenda like Weaver's was still acceptable, most of the authors (with the notable exception of Bloom) looking to gain wider support for their ideas made a great deal of effort to promote the democratic aspects of their proposals. Bennett, working for a self-proclaimed conservative president, was happy to describe his goals as liberal. His expressed goal was greater equality (in practice focusing upon equal treatment, rather than the Left's emphasis on equal outcomes). And even opposition to racial preferences or other types of affirmative action tended to be couched in terms of equal access and fairness. Another indicator of Bennett's place in the neoconservative movement was that his appropriations of Greek thought went far beyond the occasional window-dressing of Kirk and Nisbet. Plato and, especially, Aristotle, recurred constantly. But at the same time, the references were superficial and usually quite banal. Despite a little lip service towards Greek scepticism at the end, it is clear that in his works the Greeks were used as symbols of exemplary behaviour, as he wanted them to be used in education. They were America's intellectual ancestors and therefore something to be proud of, but they were also a useful tool for inculcating a Western ideology which could apparently sidestep issues of race. The implication was that a common ideology, with a simplistic path between Greece, the Renaissance and America, could bring America's different races together. The possibility that those of non-European ancestry might not have wished to be submerged in this particular melting pot was not considered.

Bloom's appropriations of Greek thought were just as universal as Bennett's but much more interesting. His book was strident and unapologetic, seemingly lamenting the same forces that conservatives had been attacking since before World War II: relativism, egalitarianism and declining standards. Bloom's work was better written and engaged more closely with both the ancient sources and the intellectual trends which it held to blame for the modern crisis (at least as far as Heidegger). But regardless of the skill in execution, there was seemingly nothing innovative in its central theses. However, nuances abounded beneath the surface. The aspects decried by liberals were not really the savage attacks on modern academic scepticism they presumed. Bloom himself seemed shocked by the reaction of the Left, which to him responded with 'an

absolutely ferocious hostility and anger' and characterized him as 'sexist, racist, homophobic and elitist'.[131] The work was mostly well received on the Right,[132] with only a few critics raising doubts about Bloom's real beliefs. Nonetheless, in the one place we may have expected the clearest understanding of Bloom's Straussian approach and methodology, the work was savaged; including by Jaffa, who attacked Bloom for *not* being homophobic. And those middle-class values apparently most appealing to conservatives were really being attacked by Bloom as only fit for the uneducated. Whilst relativism was apparently criticized for its harmful effects on the young, there was no philosophical argument against relativism: myths should be taught as true (at least until the potential philosophers had been identified, at which point they could be granted the dangerous truth). Intellectuals could critique the ideas of the common folk, but they had to be subtle about it. The criticism of popular music was also misunderstood: it seemed at first to be heading towards moral prudishness, but the real criticism was that modern youths had a powerful attachment to something which was not provocative enough.

Critics similarly tended to misunderstand Bloom's view of America. Bennett stood for a fairly straightforward view of American exceptionalism. For Bennett, the roots of Western greatness lay in Antiquity, but its growth had culminated in the blossoming of America. America was the heir to and ultimate fulfilment of 'the West'. America was the pinnacle of a sort of progress to Bloom, in that America stood as the supreme expression of modernity. But Bloom's modernity was a triumph of bourgeois dullness, making America exceptional only in its perfect philistinism. Left-wing critics tended to focus on Bloom's evocations of American power as if he was celebrating it, but the key issue for Bloom was America's backwardness, from which American universities represented, at their pre-1960s best, the only respite. His complaints about Americans' supposed lack of patriotism did not follow from any patriotism of his own, but from a fear that a less patriotic America might fall prey to a government that would intrude even further into his civilized academic sanctuary.

All these misunderstandings are related in some way to the central discrepancy that must have been disorientating to readers unfamiliar with Bloom's debt to Strauss. Plato was invoked throughout as the ultimate authority, but then in many instances the examples from Plato

seemed to suggest that Bloom disagreed with him on fundamental issues (e.g. censorship of music, equality of women). Only at the end of the book, talking about the debt he owed to Plato, was Bloom explicit about the ironic nature of the *Republic* to Straussians: 'I have almost always used it to point out what we should not hope for, as a teaching of moderation and resignation.'[133]

The key point then was that the *Republic* was a warning: allowing utopian intellectuals to strip away superstitions and manage society would lead to undesirable outcomes in the real world. Plato provided an astute analysis of human nature, but his recommendations were not supposed to be put into effect. Attempting to bring the *Republic* to life in America would be dangerous and damaging. Nonetheless, there remain questions. Bloom's support for the traditional canon and disdain for a canon dictated by diversity was unequivocal. The problem with modern canons was that they were not based on what was the best or most truthful.[134] But if absolute truths were only an unknowable possibility, a set of 'permanent concerns', how could we ever really put together a canon based upon the 'best or most truthful' with any sort of confidence? Bloom offered no answer.

Ultimately, in spite of the popularity of Bloom's book and the many conservative assaults on higher education that followed, 'there is little doubt as to which side won the war. In the late 1980s and 1990s, diversity pervaded higher education.' According to Christopher Loss, almost half of all four-year colleges made students take at least one multicultural general education course by the early 1990s.[135] Conservative intellectuals tended to blame the Republican Party for their losses in the Culture Wars. Conservative thinkers had refined a complex system of ideas, but ideas alone were not enough if there were no powerful interest groups eager to push for their adoption. As a result, the conservative movement tended to focus on issues with wider support, such as tax cuts and anti-communism. Patrick Buchanan, paleo-conservative journalist and politician, lamented the Right's lack of focus on winning the Culture War: while the Right had been busy winning elections and concentrating on defence and the economy, the Left had been 'quietly seizing all the commanding heights of American art and culture'.[136]

Nonetheless, although the Great Books movement declined and courses emphasizing diversity increased, this did not equate to the total

repudiation of the Western canon feared by conservatives. According to one progressive commentator, 'dead white males' still dominated the curriculum in the early 1990s. The most oft-assigned book in his own education was Plato's *Republic*. For Wilson, conservatives had exaggerated the impact of multiculturalism, turning genuine debates about extending the canon to include books from other groups and cultures into an assault on the Western heritage.[137] And American students still tended to have an exposure to a wider variety of classical literature than students in Europe. Whilst right-wing criticism of the '-isms' has continued since Bloom and Bennett, and issues like affirmative action are still with us, today's debates often relate to the more prosaic issues of costs and funding, with many on the Right questioning whether 'the humanities are worth supporting at all'.[138]

CHAPTER 5

WAR AND GREECE

> It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which, human nature being what it is, will, at some point or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever.
>
> Thucydides[1] (*c.*460–*c.*400 BC)

Conservative appropriations of Greek thought in the foreign policy arena have a slightly different complexion from those explored in earlier chapters. In debates over the meaning of truth, free speech, morality and education, the Greek thought with which American conservatives engaged was primarily philosophical. The Athenian historical context was sometimes important, for example in the idealization of wider Athenian culture that we saw in Chapter 4, but the threads running through diverse conservative works were usually presented as ahistorical, universally applicable philosophical ideas. In the foreign policy debates examined in this chapter, the emphasis shifts. There is some employment of philosophy, such as the prominent weight given in Straussian analysis to regime type, but the main focus is on the historical: using analogous examples from Greek history to identify lessons for contemporary American policy. For those who agree with Thucydides that human nature is an eternal constant, this might seem fairly straightforward; but how much is modern America comparable in

its internal dynamics or its external relationships with fifth-century Athens? And consequently, how useful can Athenian analogies really be for guiding American policy? The chapter looks at the build-up to the 2003 Iraq War, during which Greek examples and thought were used in three distinct but connected ways: the model of Athens as a benevolent hegemon, to be contrasted with imperial Rome; the use of Thucydides as an international relations theorist by different writers in sometimes contradictory ways; and the ways that the works of Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon, mediated through a Straussian lens, were used to develop a theory of 'regime' which was conducive to a policy of regime change in foreign nations.

Attention is concentrated on the period between the end of the Cold War and the end of the first term of George W. Bush (2001–2005). Thanks to the prominent role ascribed to Thucydides in neoconservative thought by Irving Kristol, there has been a degree of misunderstanding around his influence on neoconservatives in this period. This chapter untangles this confusion to show how Greek thought was used to promote a muscular American foreign policy in two complementary ways: some conservatives sought to draw lessons by invoking Thucydides as a theorist of international politics, whilst Straussians focused on the importance of regime, using ideas from Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle. Running through debates over both regime (and regime change) and the strategic advice of historian-polemicists such as Victor Davis Hanson (born 1953) and Donald Kagan (born 1932), were the interlinked issues of imperialism and American exceptionalism.

The Cold War

Many of the debates and perspectives surrounding the Iraq War had their roots in the Cold War. During the early Cold War there was a largely bipartisan, mainstream strategy known as containment, which called for America to resist any expansion of the USSR into the non-communist world. There was disagreement about how strong such resistance should be, but differences of opinion principally concerned means rather than ends. Dissenters from the consensus tended to come from the extremes: from the radical, anti-war Left, eventually roused to action by Vietnam, and from the 'rollback' conservatives of *National Review*, who wanted America to pursue a much more ambitious, aggressive strategy to free

central and eastern Europe, as well as North Korea and China, from communist control. Right-wing isolationism of the pre-World War II variety was largely sidelined in conservative thought.

If international relations theory had a founding father, that father was Thucydides.[2] This was particularly true of the realist school of international relations theorists, which underpinned containment. All realist theories are 'grounded in an understanding of international politics, and politics more generally, as a constant struggle for, and conflict over, power and security'.[3] However, despite claims of Thucydides' importance to realism, references to him were sparse in the field's early canonical texts. E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* never mentioned Thucydides by name, although it did mention the notion that 'justice is the right of the stronger',[4] which is surely a reference to Thucydides' description of the Athenian ambassadors' position in the 'Melian Dialogue'.[5] Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* made only two brief references to Thucydides, although he did borrow, in *American Foreign Policy*, some Thucydidean ideas via Hobbes concerning morality and the state, and his discussion of bipolarity was later closely associated with Thucydides.[6]

The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) between Athens and Sparta, described by Thucydides, was often used as an analogy for the Cold War between the United States and the USSR.[7] Perhaps the most prominent early recruitment of Thucydides to analyse the contemporary geopolitical situation was formulated by Secretary of State George C. Marshall in 1947. In an influential speech at Princeton, Marshall doubted 'whether a man can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding certain of the basic issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the fall of Athens'.[8] It has also been posited that Thucydides' later installation as a godfather by international relations theorists was due to Louis Halle's influential article in the *Foreign Service Journal*, 'A Message from Thucydides', and to later thinkers influenced by Toynbee.[9] Halle, an academic then working for the US Department of State, had argued that the United States was 'called upon to assume the leadership of the free world' and that the meaning of Thucydides had 'been heightened by the events of our day, how the history that he wrote has become altogether more vivid and poignant'.[10]

The key tenets of realism usually associated with Thucydides were that he described the 'security dilemma', in which states in fear of each

other engage in an arms race; that states value expediency above morality and that external structural factors (a state's level of power relative to other states) were more important in determining foreign policy than internal make-up. In recent decades, this realist view of Thucydides has come under increasing attack, with critics[11] contending that his text was much more complex than the realists allowed.[12]

From a neoconservative perspective, realism had two key flaws: it only justified foreign interventions to secure direct American national interests; and it did not recognize the ideological make-up of regimes as a significant factor in the way they pursued their foreign policy goals. In consequence, realists tend not to support humanitarian interventions or interventions to secure changes of regime. In this sense, Democrat administrations were often not especially guided by realist principles. President Clinton was actually quite keen on humanitarian interventions during his two terms in office. He was less keen on headlines about American casualties. After the 1993 Black Hawk Down incident in Somalia, America tended to rely on air strikes and economic sanctions, reserving its troops for peace-keeping roles and humanitarian relief.

Conservative Perspectives

For much of the Cold War, the designations of hawks and doves had not been synonymous with Republican and Democrat or Right and Left. Indeed, some of the strongest supporters of containment, such as President Truman in the 1940s and Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson in the 1970s, were Democrats. Although the experience of Vietnam and the Democratic Party's shift to a less aggressive foreign policy pushed some Democrat hawks towards the Republican Party, many such individuals maintained their progressive outlooks. The conservative movement of the immediate postwar period had initially been divided between isolationist libertarians and strong anti-communists. When *Human Events* was founded in 1944, the two aims of the journal were small government constitutionalism and non-interventionism abroad. Another postwar journal dedicated to free-market economics, *The Freeman*, founded in 1950, was riven by dissent over foreign policy, with key contributors arguing for and against American involvement in the Cold War. In the early years of the Cold War, America's shrinking band of conservative isolationists feared that global commitments and a large

military build-up were putting America on the same course as ancient Rome. According to Garet Garrett (1878–1954), a conservative who retained his pre-war isolationism in the postwar period, 1950s America had already 'crossed the boundary that lies between Republic and Empire'. Describing Augustus dissolving the Roman Republic by incremental degrees, Garrett compared it to the ways in which America's limited government had been 'eroded away by argument and dialectic' under the Roosevelt administration. These acts were justified by necessity, in a way that 'Caesar might have said it to the Roman Senate'.[13] Nonetheless, non-interventionism declined in popularity, especially after the USSR obtained the atomic bomb in 1949, and a number of isolationists eventually became prominent Cold War warriors, including William Buckley. The question of whether the Right's isolationist impulse had disappeared for good, or had merely been overridden by the communist bogeyman, would become important decades later in the 1990s.

In 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and offered America its first test in the new era. Joseph Sobran, a senior editor at *National Review*, argued against American intervention, contending that the Right should focus on reducing the size of government instead of building a 'global empire'. According to Sobran, America was not threatened by Saddam Hussein and the media had simply made him their 'new Hitler of the month'.[14] Patrick Buchanan, who would go on to become the most politically prominent of the conservative isolationists in the 1990s, also criticized the interventionists. As a speechwriter for Nixon and a communications director for Reagan, he had impeccable credentials as a Cold War hawk. But with the Cold War over, he no longer saw a need for foreign intervention when US interests were not threatened directly. Buchanan was popular with the Republican base and he was later the runner-up for the 1992 and 1996 Republican presidential nominations. In 1990, his arguments against interventionism were controversial for their perceived anti-Semitism. He argued that there were 'only two groups beating the drums for war in the Middle East – the Israeli Defense Ministry and its amen corner in the United States', and he labelled America's Congress 'Israeli-occupied territory'.[15] The Bush administration responded to criticism by announcing that Iraq was in the final stages of developing a nuclear bomb. This foretaste of the 2003 assertions over Iraqi

weapons of mass destruction successfully shifted public opinion behind the campaign.

Any hopes that the first Gulf War would herald a new period of intense interventionism seemed to be dashed by the embarrassing retreat from Somalia. However, despite Somalia showing that at least some American politicians still feared another Vietnam, neoconservatives spent the 1990s arguing for greater interventionism around the globe. In 1996, neoconservatives Robert Kagan and William Kristol founded the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) to counter what they perceived as a growing wave of isolationism. Future members of the Bush II administration, including Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, I. Lewis Libby, Elliott Abrams and Richard Cheney as well as other prominent neoconservative thinkers, including Francis Fukuyama, Donald Kagan and Norman Podhoretz, were founding signatories. PNAC shared the same goal as a State Department policy briefing authored by Wolfowitz in 1992: to prolong the period of America's 'unipolar moment' of global supremacy. This could be achieved by significantly increasing military expenditure, strengthening democratic ties, promoting freedom abroad and accepting America's 'unique role' in the world.[16] The removal of Saddam Hussein was another key goal.[17]

According to William Kristol, writing in 2003 to justify the invasion of Iraq, Clinton had been

> guided by a brand of wishful liberalism, a view that looks to the world community and its institutions as the ultimate source of international legitimacy, is profoundly uncomfortable with the unilateral assertion of American power, and tends to favour policies that rely far more heavily on the carrot than on the stick.[18]

For neoconservatives like Kristol and Kaplan, America had a 'responsibility for maintaining a decent world order'.[19] According to Nina Easton,[20] the PNAC foreign policy positions in the 1990s were not in tune with a large segment of the Republican Party, which supported a much more isolationist stance and thought that the Clinton administration was too adventurous abroad. William Kristol and Robert Kagan wrote in 1996 that the conservative movement's foreign policy stance was the most muddled since the beginning of the Cold War. Conservatives were fairly united in rejecting Clinton's 'Wilsonian

multilateralism' but divided between 'the neoisolationism of Patrick Buchanan' and the 'conservative realism of Kissinger and his disciples'. For Kristol and Kagan, the best approach was 'benevolent global hegemony', which meant preserving America's pre-eminent global position by 'strengthening America's security, supporting its friends, advancing its interests and standing up for its principles around the world'. Instead, Americans were becoming complacent and neglecting the policy of deterrence that had worked against the USSR. They summed up their approach as 'military supremacy and moral confidence', but the three corollaries of this approach were higher defence spending, more citizen involvement in the military through wider reserve forces (since the draft was 'perhaps' no longer feasible), and greater moral clarity, which could be expressed by putting pressure on regimes like Iran, Cuba and China, 'intended ultimately to bring about a change of regime'.[21] This focus on regime change would become prominent during the debate over Iraq.

According to Kristol and Kagan, no lasting domestic conservative agenda could be achieved without first re-moralizing American foreign policy. In this we see the flip side of the argument used by many conservatives in the education debates that a re-moralized education system was needed in order to ensure a strong and successful foreign policy. For the neoconservatives, realism could not satisfy the morally engaged American electorate, which would consequently not have the willpower needed for difficult, long-term campaigns. In 1998, PNAC wrote a public letter to President Clinton asking him to work actively for 'the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power'.[22] Of the letter's 18 signatories, 11 went on to join the Bush administration.

Neoconservatism was buttressed by a high degree of confidence in the effectiveness of American power. Writing from the perspective of 2004, the popular neoconservative columnist Charles Krauthammer described the fall of the USSR as the birth of 'a unipolar world dominated by a single superpower unchecked by any rival and with decisive reach in every corner of the globe'. According to Krauthammer, this was 'a staggering new development in history not seen since the fall of Rome'.[23] Such confidence in America's decisive power now seems hubristic following America's retreats from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Krauthammer attacked the alternatives to a neoconservative foreign policy: isolationism, liberal internationalism and realism. He dismissed

isolationism as 'inappropriate' in a world where modern technology meant enemies could threaten America from the other side of the planet. Clintonian liberal internationalism received a larger treatment. According to Krauthammer, it involved America in foreign adventures where there was no American interest, and he pointed out that the Clinton administration involved America in 'deepening intervention in Somalia, invading Haiti, bombing Bosnia and finally going to war over Kosovo'. But liberal interventionists were opposed to 'projecting power abroad to secure economic, political and strategic goods'. The second problem with liberal interventionism was 'multilateralism', which Krauthammer saw as a way to tie America down and make it submit to the goals of weaker powers. Finally, realists were right that the liberal attempt to see the world as a community was an illusion,[24] but their own focus was too narrow to see that exporting democracy abroad benefited the American national interest and the liberals were right that democracies made better allies than tyrannies. In addition, realism did not resonate with Americans who wanted to see their government behaving morally.

For Krauthammer, neoconservatism took the best parts of realism and liberal interventionism: intervening for the sake of American national interests but applying a broader definition of national interest that included regime change (adopting the liberal interventionist view that 'democracies are inherently more friendly to the United States, less belligerent to their neighbours, and generally more inclined to peace'). So neoconservatives were committed to using American power to promote freedom and democracy, but did so with American interests in mind and without tying America down by committing to work through multilateral bodies like the UN.[25] This was the neoconservative consensus by the end of the 1990s, but still not the dominant approach in the Republican Party.

George W. Bush and Iraq

In the 2000 primaries for the Republican Party nomination, many neoconservatives, following the lead of William Kristol's *Weekly Standard*, supported McCain rather than Bush. McCain had a reputation as a foreign policy hawk, whereas Bush had stated in the campaign that 'I don't think our troops ought to be used for what's called

nation-building.'[26] After his election, Bush was not popular with committed conservatives in the way that Goldwater and Reagan had been and they were often suspicious of his talk of 'compassionate conservatism'. Even after 9/11 they were on the lookout for signs that he was selling out. They criticized his attempts to ally with Syria and Iran against al-Qaeda but were most unhappy with his careful distinction between Islam and Islamists and what they viewed as his praise of the former.[27]

Of the three groups within the Bush administration (realists, nationalists and neoconservatives) the neoconservatives were weakest in influence just before 9/11. Three explanations have been given for their increased prominence within the administration afterwards: some sort of conspiracy; the one given by neoconservatives (their policy was right all along and after 11 September more people recognized that); and that their policy recommendations simply struck a chord with the rest of the Right after the attack.[28] According to Krauthammer, after 9/11 it was neoconservatism which 'rallied the American people to a struggle over values'.[29] Perhaps. Another possibility is that 9/11 seemed to validate the neoconservative critique of American foreign policy. America had been attacked out of the blue and it was the neoconservatives who had been arguing for years that America had needed to go abroad to fight the kinds of people who had now attacked them at home.

It is clear that Bush had not intended to follow a neoconservative agenda at the beginning of his presidency. He had made clear that neoconservatives were not central to his plans when entering the White House: the realists Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell got important roles and Clinton's head of the CIA (George Tenet) was kept on in his position. The hawk Donald Rumsfeld was put in charge of Defense but he had wanted to create a 'lean and agile' military. Such a military force would be perfect for shock-and-awe attacks but much less so for the long-term holding operations required for a neoconservative strategy of regime change. Neoconservatives did occupy a number of more junior foreign policy roles. Richard Armitage, the Deputy Secretary of State had worked with Powell in the Reagan Pentagon. Wolfowitz, the new Under Secretary of Defense, had also worked alongside Armitage under Reagan, in the Pentagon under Cheney and on a commission headed by Rumsfeld in the 1990s. At a lower level, I. Lewis Libby, an adviser to Cheney, had been a student of Wolfowitz at Yale and his aide during the

Reagan and Bush senior administrations. Elliott Abrams, member of the National Security Council in Bush's first term and Deputy National Security Adviser in his second, was the son-in-law of Norman Podhoretz and had been a member of the State Department in the Reagan administration. Abram Shulsky, a Straussian scholar, became Director of the Office of Special Plans (see 'Plato, Intelligence and Regime' section).

Iraq II

According to some critics, the neoconservatives used their new influence to turn American foreign policy away from a Republican tradition of caution and consensus building,[30] but this is something of an overstatement. For example, the Reagan Republicans of the early 1980s had also been criticized for their aggressive approach to the USSR. Secondly, whatever the extent of the Republican rightward drift, missing from these accounts about the end of bipartisanship was the Democratic leftward shift beginning in the late 1960s. The foreign policy gap between the two parties was growing because they were both moving away from the centre. As Maria Ryan has convincingly argued, the neoconservatives were 'firmly within the mainstream historical tradition of American foreign relations and differed only in degrees from others within that mainstream tradition'.[31]

It is also worth remembering that the fact that neoconservatives supported the Iraq War does not necessarily mean they were directing the Bush administration. Neoconservative intellectuals have been more than happy to boost their reputations as influential thinkers, but their real impact is often difficult to ascertain with any degree of accuracy. Ryan has contended that the neoconservatives were part of a network of intellectuals, comprising both neoconservatives and nationalists, such as Dick Cheney, John Bolton and Donald Rumsfeld, who shared their aim to maintain America's pre-eminent world power.[32] Condoleezza Rice has also claimed that pre-emption was not a novel idea in American foreign policy:

> There has never been a moral or legal requirement that a country wait to be attacked before it can address existential threats [...] The USA has long affirmed the right to anticipatory self-defense.[33]

David Frum and Richard Perle, who both served in the Bush administration, listed a number of justifications for the invasion of Iraq: the 1993 attempt to assassinate George Bush whilst on a visit to Kuwait, Iraqi attacks on US-protected safe havens in northern Iraq in 1996 and the Iraqis forcing out weapons inspectors in 1998.[34]

Four months after the attacks on the Twin Towers, President Bush outlined the new anti-terrorism approach in what became known at the 'Axis of Evil' speech. According to Bush

> our second goal is to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since September the 11th. But we know their true nature. North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens.
>
> Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom.
>
> Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens [...] States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.[35]

Perle and Frum had agreed that Iraq was just such a sponsor of terrorism and that it had the capability to provide its terrorist proxies with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Writing as it became evident that Iraq possessed no such weapons at the time of the invasion, they placed the emphasis on programmes rather than stockpiles, arguing unconvincingly that the absence of stockpiles was misleading because programmes, even without having made weapons as yet, were still a threat since they could produce weapons at some point in the future.[36] The issue of regime change was also covered. Islamism was a response to the poverty, corruption and repression endemic in the Middle East and the West had been made a scapegoat for the failures of Muslim states suffering poor governance – thus regime,

not culture or Western failures, was the problem. Iraq had the potential to solve these problems by being a 'good example' of democracy and economic growth. The justification for regime change was that it would 'challenge the region with the power of a better alternative'.[37]

Bush has confirmed that his approach to terrorism, including targeting state supporters of non-state actors and the policy of pre-emption, 'was a departure from America's policies over the past two decades'. In justifying this shift, Bush used examples of American retreat post-dating the Vietnam War, hinting that he may have believed he was restoring an earlier approach. Even when attacked in war, as in Somalia in 1993, the American response had been to withdraw when faced with casualties or offer token retaliation (for example, the bombing of two American embassies in 1998 sparked an American missile salvo into Afghanistan). Bush has himself written that his post-9/11 policy change came about because he recognized that previous limited action had been perceived as weakness.[38]

Seeing the World through Greece

Exceptionalism, Empire and Hegemony

Two partly opposed and partly intertwined concepts exist in tension at the heart of American foreign policy: American exceptionalism and imperialism. Exceptionalism is the belief in the uniqueness of the American experiment, usually in terms of the principles underlying it. The concept of exceptionalism is thus imbued with moral superiority, which at first glance makes it antithetical to imperialism, which seems to represent old world domination of the weak in the foreign policy arena. However, exceptionalism is a contested concept: to internationalists it has helped to justify foreign crusades on behalf of liberty, but to critics it is a dangerous myth.[39] Belief in an exceptional American morality has led to two outcomes: as a force for good, America could help other states, treating them as partners in a global community of nations. This stance can be associated with Woodrow Wilson's plans for the post-World War I world. On the other hand, American exceptionalism has justified the imposition of American power through the argument that such control benefits the controlled. In reality, there has been no such clean division between the two camps for real-life policy issues, where other factors have

always impinged. But the two poles should be held in mind when assessing where actors have stood along a spectrum between them.

It should be noted that the Right does not hold a monopoly on the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. For instance, a number of Clinton administration officials seemed to support the notion of America as a benign hegemon based upon its exceptional moral qualities. Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, described America as the 'indispensable nation' because it could 'stand tall and hence see further than other nations'. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott argued that America was unique because it 'defines its strength – indeed, its very greatness – not in terms of its ability to achieve or maintain dominance over others, but in terms of its ability to work with others in the interests of the international community as a whole'. Finally, Treasury Secretary Lawrence H. Summers described America as the 'first non-imperialist superpower'.[40]

With America's ascent to sole superpower status, more people began to question whether or not America was really an empire and, if it was, whether it could avoid imperial decline. Whilst some proponents of the view that America was engaged in an imperial enterprise viewed it in a short time frame, pinning the blame on particular groups such as the neoconservatives,[41] others have seen American imperialism stretching back to the early nineteenth century.[42] Critics[43] have argued that America's embrace of liberty and freedom has always been much more problematic than its defenders claim, and it would be easy to point to historical examples of immorality, such as America's treatment of Native American Indians or slavery. Indeed, in spite of the exceptionalist view of an America in opposition to the imperial greed of the old world, the view of America as an empire has a long pedigree in American thought. William Henry Drayton, chief justice of South Carolina, wrote in 1776 of God allowing his generation 'to erect the American Empire' which could be 'the most glorious of any upon record'.[44] The very first of the *Federalist Papers*, discussing the new constitution, contended that 'the fate of an empire' depended upon its adoption.[45] Even Thomas Jefferson referred to America as an 'Empire of Liberty' on at least two occasions. During the American Revolution he viewed the empire of liberty as a bulwark against the British in Canada,[46] but almost 30 years later he used the phrase in the context of arguing for an expansionary war of conquest against Canada, describing the American constitution as especially well-suited for 'extensive empire'.[47]

Notwithstanding such rhetoric, Americans have historically tended to view the Roman Republic and its turn to Empire as a warning.[48] Imperialism has even fewer positive connotations in contemporary usage, so it is unsurprising that modern politicians have been less keen on imperial comparisons than their revolutionary period predecessors. President George W. Bush rejected the imperial comparison in 2004, saying that: 'We're not an imperial power [. . .] we're a liberating power',[49] although past empires often cloaked their ambitions in moral language too. In a speech to the Republican Party Convention in 2004, Bush acknowledged the expansionist thread running through American history, though again the expansionism was justified with the rhetoric of freedom: 'The story of America is the story of expanding liberty: an ever-widening circle constantly growing to reach further and include more.'[50]

Neoconservatives have also tended to argue that America was exceptional because of its commitments to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and its willingness to promote those values abroad. When arguing for a morally crusading foreign policy, William Kristol and Robert Kagan, son of the ancient historian and fellow neoconservative, Donald Kagan, used Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan as examples of leaders who had inspired Americans to take on international responsibilities and had 'celebrated American exceptionalism'.[51] This article was expanded and included in *Present Dangers*, an edited volume of essays from fellow neoconservatives including Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Kagan.[52] The introduction repeated their earlier recommendations regarding building up America's defences and using them to promote democracy abroad.

As we saw in Chapter 4, neoconservatives like William Bennett often viewed American exceptionalism through the lens of Western civilization, with America the culmination and perfection of a process that had started in ancient Greece. Unsurprisingly then, Bennett himself has participated in foreign policy debates. His contribution to *Present Dangers* argued that American exceptionalism justified foreign intervention because America's 'interest and principle converge'. According to Bennett, America's founding principles ensured that its patriotism was qualitatively different from that of other nations. Thus American attempts to influence other states served the purposes of both advancing American interests and helping those other states. Maintaining American power was not simply a case of maintaining a system which

benefited Americans, it was a 'defense of western civilization'. For Bennett, key objectives in the defence of Western civilization were the removal of Saddam Hussein from power and increased defence spending to deter other potential aggressors. Ultimately, as long as America remained committed to the export of liberty and democracy, its 'self-interest as a great power will be inextricably linked to mankind's universal interest in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'.[53]

After 9/11, Bennett wrote *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terror*, in which he made the case for an invasion in order to enforce Iraqi regime change, eliminate WMD and liberate the Iraqi people. Bennett feared that the American people did not have the will needed to engage in a long war against terrorism because their faith in American exceptionalism had been eroded by relativism.[54] He again maintained that the antidote was the study of Western civilization, in which different viewpoints could be represented without going down the route of relativism: on warfare Westerners 'read Homer and Erasmus. For wisdom on the ends of politics, we study Aristotle and Machiavelli.' It was such openness that differentiated America from the terrorists and that was 'behind our evolving institutions and behind our unchanging values; it is the essence and the engine of civilization'.[55]

The 9/11 attacks also inspired the neoconservative journalist Max Boot to argue in the *Weekly Standard* that Americans needed to accept their imperial destiny. His argument partly followed the approach of PNAC and the lead of his editor, William Kristol. However, he pushed the interventionist argument further by arguing that such interventions needed to be overtly imperial. The Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan was due to America's pulling support from moderate groups in 1989 and the ascent of al-Qaeda was helped by America's pullout from Somalia in 1994, which created an impression that America would retreat from adversity. In contrast, Boot argued that what the world needed was a much more committed America, willing to provide 'the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen'. For Boot, America needed to consider a long-term occupation of Afghanistan and needed to overthrow Saddam Hussein at the earliest opportunity, which would then 'ensure fruitful cooperation from the region's many opportunists, who will show a newfound eagerness to be helpful'. He claimed that America had too often supported dictators out of a misguided belief in *realpolitik*, but that

overthrowing Hussein would show the Arab region that America was committed to their freedom. This would turn Iraq into a 'beacon of hope for the oppressed peoples of the Middle East'.[56] Boot was not the only avowed imperialist. One British commentator, Sebastian Mallaby, wrote an influential article in *Foreign Affairs* arguing that existing international cooperative institutions could not combat increasing levels of disorder, and he asked whether 'an imperial America [might] arise to fill the gap?' For Mallaby, this would be a desirable outcome and he believed that 'the logic of neoimperialism is too compelling for the Bush administration to resist'.[57]

Perhaps foreseeably, whilst many neoconservatives agreed with these arguments in favour of a more active foreign policy, few were willing to embrace a term as discredited as imperialism. Kimberly Kagan, daughter-in-law of Donald Kagan, labelled the comparisons between America and former empires 'deceptive and misleading'. Kagan's article focused on a comparison between America and the Roman Empire and she cited specific examples of Roman imperialism to argue that America was not an empire. Unlike Rome, America was not interested in further territorial possessions. More dubiously, she claimed that whilst Rome had a deliberate policy of 'exporting Roman culture [...] to the provinces in order to enhance the state's control', America did 'not engage in cultural imperialism in the Roman sense'. For Kagan, foreigners adopted American culture voluntarily, to share in America's success (she was apparently unaware that this was also often the case with earlier empires, such as Rome's). She returned to the depiction of America used in the 1990s by Clinton officials and by William Kristol, of American hegemony rather than empire. Kagan claimed that America, unlike Rome, needed to convince its allies to follow its policies, and it intervened in foreign regions 'to help those regions regain stability and then rule themselves'. Thus, America should embrace its 'hegemony in all of its complexity and difficulty'.[58]

This use of hegemony as an alternative to empire was adopted by other leading neoconservatives. For Robert Kagan, the world had 'just entered a long era of American hegemony'. 'Americans seek to defend and advance a liberal international order. But the only stable and successful international order Americans can imagine is one that has the United States at its centre.'[59] According to Charles Krauthammer, 'even Rome is no model for what America is today' because America did

not have 'the imperial culture of Rome' and because America 'does not hunger for territory'. Krauthammer went a step further from arguing for hegemony in the abstract to drawing the analogy with ancient hegemony. America was 'an Athenian republic', only 'more republican and infinitely more democratic'. Again, America was 'not an imperial power' but a 'commercial republic' and it was only through a 'pure accident of history' that America had become the 'custodian of the international system'.[60]

Elliot Cohen attempted to strike a more nuanced balance between Athenian hegemony and Roman or British imperialism in a 2004 article, 'History and the Hyperpower'.[61] Cohen had been a founder member of the Project for the New American Century and served as Counselor to the United States Department of State under Secretary Condoleezza Rice in the George W. Bush administration. By 2004, the debate about imperialism among the neoconservatives had grown more subtle. Cohen saw it as one of semantics: regardless of what you called it or how morally it was used, the key point was that America had vastly more power than any other state. Cohen initially focused upon the raw power of the Roman and British empires in contrast to America, rather than the principles underlying their foreign relations. In Cohen's analysis, America was different from Rome and Britain because it was much more powerful than either. Its military dwarfed that of any other power, accounting for almost half of global defence spending, whereas Britain and Rome, even at their peaks, had to deal with genuine threats, such as the Parthians for the Romans and continental European powers for Britain. America's economy in 2004 was still larger and more productive than that of any other power, although the lead over its competitors had been shrinking for decades. Cohen claimed that America was also more influential in terms of ideas than Britain or Rome. Consequently, on these bases, America was more imperial than Rome and Britain were, the 'hyperpower' of the article's title.

Nonetheless, imperialism is about how power is used as well as how much power is at the state's disposal. Cohen, like Kagan, argued that America was reluctant to use its power and that democracy and imperialism might be incompatible in the long term. To support this, he referred to Athens, not as a hegemon, but as an imperial power which unravelled due to 'the difficulty in withstanding the pressure of imperial necessity, compulsions that corrupt and even destroy the freedoms at the

root of democracy'. Cohen accepted that America's claims to morality were not that different from the justifications of former empires. Nevertheless, he maintained that imperialism was dead, precisely because the right to self-rule is today so widely accepted. Depictions of America as an empire were therefore dangerous, because they were a 'temptation to hubris, overstretch, and disregard of the claims of the international community'. Imperialism was over, but 'an age of American hegemony has begun'.

There was an element of confusion in Cohen's argument. Apparently, the terms did not really matter, but could still be dangerous; and America was anyway not an empire, but at the same time all of the historical examples Cohen used to guide American conduct were drawn from other empires. Likewise, the example of Athens showed that imperialism was incompatible with democracy, but then America was described as similarly imperial. Finally, after defining America as a hegemon, he proceeded to discuss the challenges facing it as an 'imperial power'. Other powers would resent it and would side with its weaker enemies, leading to 'diplomatic and military isolation', which was what had happened to America after 9/11. The failure to successfully stabilize Iraq after the invasion showed the need for America to 'develop its own versions of viceroys, legates, residents and procurators'. The works of Greek and Roman historians had much to offer and he described Polybius showing how the consistent policy of divide and rule was a key ingredient in Rome's recipe for success; and Livy demonstrating the benefit of not threatening other states with words, but with actions. The lesson was that American power was 'so obvious a fact, particularly to non-Americans, that there is no need to remind anyone of it'.

Cohen ended by arguing that, however benevolent America might be, a time would come when it would be resented. He quoted Thucydides' Pericles: 'For what you hold is, to speak plainly, a tyranny; to take it perhaps was wrong, to let it go is unsafe.' Cohen did not explicitly argue the point; however, the implication is that some aspects of American policy were unjust but that it would be unsafe to step back. Despite earlier calling America a hegemon, Cohen argued that the logic of imperialism constrained America to continue acting imperially. Thus, America's only options were whether to exercise its

power 'prudently or foolishly, consistently or fecklessly, safely or dangerously'.

Critics of American Empire

Undermining the many attempts to define America as a benign hegemon, the 2003 invasion of Iraq was globally unpopular and accusations of imperial heavy-handedness would not go away. A number of these critics described America as a new Rome. Perhaps searching for a parallel with 9/11, Cullen Murphy traced the beginning of the end for the Roman Republic back to the pirate attack on Ostia in 68 BC, which 'prompted the Romans to cede far-reaching powers to one man'. According to Murphy, the Rome/America comparison was less about moral decay or a weakening of power and more about 'the slow decay of homegrown institutions [. . .] the healthy functioning of a multi-ethnic society [. . .] and more about how everything on earth affects a superpower'.[62]

As we have seen, Patrick Buchanan emerged as a critic of the conventional, bipartisan approach to American global engagement in the 1990s. Dismissed as an isolationist, he was one of the foremost conservative critics of foreign entanglements for America. The title of his *A Republic, Not an Empire* clearly signalled his dissatisfaction with contemporary foreign policy. The work took aim at the continuing presence of American troops stationed around the world, the continuation and expansion of the anti-communist alliances of the Cold War, American support for Israel and its 1990s humanitarian interventions abroad.[63] Echoing Garrett from 50 years earlier, Buchanan contended that America's foreign policy establishment was betraying America's republican origins.[64] In summary, America had become 'as overextended as any empire in history'.[65]

In a new introduction added after 9/11, Buchanan surmised that America was targeted because it had 'been behaving like the Roman Empire'.[66] But Buchanan was not a dove, arguing for a complete American disengagement from foreign military action. He described himself as a nationalist, contending that America should intervene only where its vital interests were at stake. He favourably described American expansion in the nineteenth century and argued for a policy of maintaining a large defence budget to protect American interests. He claimed that the neoconservatives wanted America to intervene all

over the world as problems looked like arising, at the centre of an alliance of democracies under American leadership. According to Buchanan, this was 'the vision of America as imperial Rome'. His strategy would instead allow bad things to happen, with America only getting involved when American interests were directly threatened.[67]

An example of the post-9/11 isolationist tradition was a 2006 article in the paleo-conservative magazine *American Conservative*, which echoed the concerns of Buchanan. According to Kelley Vlahos, 'the United States is a republic that has been operating like an empire, and it has suffered for it'.[68] Vlahos was concerned with the domestic results of imperialism, particularly the threat posed to the Constitution. Interestingly, she suggested that empires were inherently more fragile than republics. Like Garrett in the 1950s, she blamed the Cold War for limiting congressional power in favour of the presidency, but it was 9/11 which had driven 'the president to expand these powers further and make them truly open-ended'. At that point, the president 'became an emperor'.

The neoconservatives argued that America's lack of direct territorial control over subject states made it non-imperial, but this simplified the ways in which imperial powers can assert their domination. Some critics also asserted that American empire was a commercial venture, in which American power was used to protect American economic interests.[69] In any event, it was against this rhetoric of American/Roman imperialism that neoconservatives used Athens as a benevolent alternative.

A Neoconservative Thucydides?

Neoconservative discussion of America as a latter-day hegemon can be extended to analogies between Athens and America using the events of the Peloponnesian War. Since Irving Kristol explained that, due to Leo Strauss and Donald Kagan, Thucydides' *History* was 'the favourite neoconservative text on foreign affairs',[70] critics have been keen to portray Thucydides as the inspiration for the Bush Doctrine and the invasion of Iraq. The neoconservative appropriation of Thucydides was in some ways much richer than the realist approach, although the extent and genealogy of neoconservative indebtedness to Thucydides is in doubt. Regardless of Kristol's claim, the evidence of Thucydidean influence in his writings is thin on the ground. He had maintained in

1972 that there was 'no great radical text on the conduct of foreign policy – and no great conservative text either'. He went on to mention a number of influential writers on foreign policy, but not Thucydides, who was actually cited as an example showing that 'the entire tradition of western thought has very little to say about foreign policy'.[71] In a later book, the chapter on foreign policy made no mention at all of Thucydides.[72]

Examining Kristol's first explanation for the influence of Thucydides on neoconservative foreign policy thinking, the most striking thing is Strauss's relatively limited engagement with Thucydides. As explored in Chapter 2, Strauss spent much of his career investigating the works of Xenophon and he published a number of books and essays on Plato; but his output on Thucydides was limited to one essay in *The City and Man*. According to Strauss, Thucydides 'sympathizes and makes us sympathize with political greatness as displayed in fighting for freedom and in the founding, ruling and expanding of empires'. His Thucydides was more idealistic than the Thucydides of the realists, who missed the 'presence in his thought of that which transcends "power politics"'. Nonetheless, Strauss's Thucydides still viewed the Athenian regime as 'defective' and argued that the absence of *sophrosyne* in Thucydides' description of Pericles was a criticism of his, and Athens', lack of moderation.[73] This interpretation of a cautious Thucydides, critical of foreign adventures, was unlikely to have inspired the crusading spirit of neoconservatism. However, Strauss's praise of Athenian greatness may have influenced the neoconservative rhetoric of American exceptionalism.

Donald Kagan

Kristol's other attribution for the apparent neoconservative adoption of Thucydides was the ancient historian Donald Kagan. Kagan was born in Lithuania but his family moved to America when he was a child. He obtained his PhD from Ohio State University in 1958 and taught at Cornell until the late 1960s. Like Bloom before him, Kagan was a former liberal whose rejection of liberalism was sparked by his anger at the academic establishment's response to protesting Cornell students in 1969. According to Kagan, watching university administrators appease the students with 'all the courage of Neville Chamberlain had a great impact on me, and I became much more conservative'.[74] He left

Cornell for Yale shortly afterwards, but he only became a political commentator associated with neoconservatism, contributing articles to *Commentary*, from the 1980s onwards; and he was a founding member of PNAC in 1996.

His engagement with Thucydides has been much deeper and longer than Strauss's, having written a four-volume history of the Peloponnesian War published from 1969 onwards, as well as a number of shorter works on the period and a work on Thucydides as a historian.[75] According to Lee and Morley, Kagan's readings of Thucydides and American politics were 'mutually inextricable':[76] his whole career has been spent thinking about Thucydides and American politics in an interwoven way. Even in the first volume, *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, Kagan stated explicitly that the origins of the Peloponnesian War contained 'truths of great relevance to our modern predicament'. And his approach entailed drawing 'historical analogies between situations in the fifth century BC and modern events'.[77]

This work contained a number of direct references to contemporary situations. According to Kagan, the Delian League's structure and relationship with the Hellenic League were similar to NATO's relationship with the UN, in that they were each 'a regional organization, consisting of states who were also members of the Hellenic League but clearly excluding others. The Delian League no more required Spartan approval for its actions than NATO requires Russian approval for its.'[78] Likewise, the situation in Greece after the Persian Wars was similar to the situation between the USSR and the USA after World War II. In both cases there were parties committed to peaceful coexistence in each state; however, 'in the more recent experience, the "cold warriors" won in both Russia and the United States; in Greece, "peaceful coexistence" was victorious in both Athens and Sparta'.[79] It is interesting that this statement, written on the cusp of his move to conservatism, is nowhere near as hawkish as his views eventually became. He also made a brief comparison between Spartan and Soviet foreign policy, comparing Sparta's refusal to join an Athenian-organized congress in 449 BC to the USSR's refusal to join the Marshall Plan. Both Athens and America had altruistic motives in their invitations but gained useful propaganda victories from their opponents' refusals to take part.[80]

Kagan was also not quite as critical of the consequences of appeasement as he would later become. In discussing the appeasement of Hitler and American deterrence of the Soviet Union after World War II, the lesson may at first appear to have been that deterrence was simply a better policy than appeasement. However, Kagan showed Pericles following a policy of deterrence before the Peloponnesian War which did not work, and he blamed the war in part on Pericles' 'intransigence'.[81] In 1969, his lessons seem to have been more targeted at the realists who neglected internal affairs: for Kagan, the internal make-up of states affected their responses to appeasement or deterrence and so either policy could be suitable at different times.

Kagan in 1969 did not entirely neglect the effect of external power relationships on international affairs and he concentrated much of his analysis on the nature of alliances and the tensions of bipolar international systems. But he recognized the interrelated relationship these factors had with internal dynamics. He consequently disagreed with Thucydides about the 'truest cause' of the Peloponnesian War. For Kagan, Spartan fear of growing Athenian power really only applied to the cause of the earlier Peloponnesian War, which had been preceded by growing Athenian influence over central Greece.[82] Unlike the system realists, who viewed international relations as a separate sphere from domestic politics, Kagan was adamant that 'diplomacy cannot, without serious distortion, be treated in isolation from the internal history of the states involved'; but the internal history he focused upon was political rather than social or economic. All powers accepted the stalemate after the first Peloponnesian War, but events heightened suspicions and Corinthian animosity, which led to the growing influence of the war party in Sparta (which was itself made worse by the fact that Spartan policy making was erratic due to the fluctuating nature of its political institutions, such as the annually changing board of Ephors and the dual kingship). The great danger in a bipolar world was internal political instability;[83] in Athens Pericles was in firm control, so the danger came from erratic Spartan behaviour.

Kagan's later *On the Origins of War and Preservation of Peace* placed contemporary political comparison firmly at the forefront and he showed greater faith in the policy of deterrence. Despite being based upon lectures given since the mid-1970s, he implied that the book was a response to misguided post-Cold War optimism.[84] He used four foreign

policy case studies, including the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, to contend that the Western states needed to remain vigilant and willing to pay the costs of high defence expenditure necessary to deter future aggressors.

Kagan still emphasized that Thucydides was not a realist. In contrast to the realists, Thucydides 'provided a clearer, more profound, more elegant and comprehensive explanation of why people [. . .] fight wars'.[85] He argued that the post-Cold War world, where war between 'the major powers is hard to conceive because one of them has overwhelming military superiority [. . .] and will not last'.[86] This situation was analogous to the period before the Peloponnesian War, which marked 'the end of a period of confidence and hope, and the beginning of a darker time'. Kagan viewed the wave of democratization after the fall of communism as a response to American power, which could be reversed by a period of American weakness. To support this idea, he turned to an Athenian analogy: 'when Athens was powerful and successful, its democratic constitution had a magnetic effect on other states, but its defeat was the turning point' which sent Greece 'in the direction of oligarchy'.[87] In this last point we see a related concern about regime type. Nonetheless, he did not simplistically infer Athenian/American policy based upon their democratic cultures. During a discussion of the Athenian domination of their empire he suggested that common comparisons between Athens/America and Sparta/USSR had been misleading in terms of how their alliances operated.[88] In the accompanying endnote, he elaborated: whilst,

> the American constitution and way of life are closer to the Athenians and the Soviet Union's internal arrangements were closer to those of Sparta, the workings of NATO are more similar to those of the Spartan Alliance and those of the Warsaw Pact more like those of the Athenian Empire.[89]

Realists have tended to emphasize fear and interest from Thucydides' description of the 'honour, fear and interest' which drive state behaviour.[90] In contrast, Kagan ascribed a higher value to honour, which he argued played a crucial role in the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. As he had suggested in his earlier work, it was 'honour' driving the behaviour of Corinth which caused the war.[91] The Corinthians risked a

major war with a stronger power because the insulting behaviour of their colony Corcyra was an affront to their honour. Additionally, for Kagan, a state's power was about more than military capabilities, because there would be a decline in power if 'attitudes towards it change'. The most likely reason for a change in attitude would be if the state was 'seen to lack the will to use its military power'.[92]

PNAC viewed Clinton policy towards Iraq as half-hearted and Kagan suggested that Athens too should have adopted a harder line before the Peloponnesian War. By sending a token force to Corcyra, the Athenians intended to deter Corinth without signalling a wish to 'destroy Corinth', following a policy 'called in the current jargon "minimal deterrence"'.[93] Kagan was more forthright in 1995 about Athenian options. In 1969, the Athenian action over Corcyra was not singled out as Athenian weakness but viewed as sensible moderation. Likewise, the Athenian aggression towards Potidaea and Megara was a misjudgement because they helped to rouse the Spartan war party; but, in 1995, the Athenians had not been aggressive enough to these states. By exhibiting signs of weakness, they encouraged them to resist. Kagan criticized both policies for their lack of decisiveness. The Athenians failed to deter the smaller power but still 'frightened and angered the Spartans'.[94]

Kagan's overall argument by 1995 was that states like Athens and the USA maintained peace by retaining 'preponderant power' and demonstrating 'the will to accept the burdens and responsibilities required'.[95] This was a subtle shift from his earlier position. In both analyses, the Athenian policy had charted a moderate course between outright aggression and appeasement, but in 1969 he seemed to imply that appeasement might have been better. By 1995, he was firmly of the view that the Athenians had not been assertive enough. In this way, the reading of Thucydides, like PNAC, was urging America towards higher defence spending and a more assertive attitude to the use of military power.

Victor Davis Hanson

After 9/11, Victor Davis Hanson rose to prominence in the conservative media. Like Donald Kagan, Hanson's practice as an ancient historian informed his foreign policy analyses. Hanson studied at the University of California before obtaining his PhD from Stanford in 1980. His works on military history posited that military power was closely linked to

wider social and institutional traditions. Hanson comes from a farming background and he has often emphasized the relationship between agriculture and military history.[96] According to Hanson, the West was superior in war to non-Western cultures due to the values that undergird it, such as democracy, individualism and freedom.[97] These values resulted in the West consistently defeating non-Western states throughout history, beginning with the Greek wars against Persia and culminating in the military supremacy of modern America.

Though he denies being a neoconservative, he 'came to support neocon approaches first in the wars against the Taliban and Saddam' because he agreed with the 'post-9/11 effort to stop radical Islam and state sponsors of terror'.[98] As we shall see below, even before 9/11 he was a fellow traveller on a number of important issues, such as the damage 'theory' had done to higher education. After 9/11, Hanson began to write prolifically on foreign policy issues. Two books, *An Autumn of War: What America Learned from September 11 and the War on Terrorism*[99] and *Between War and Peace: Lessons from Afghanistan to Iraq*[100] collected together his articles in response to 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' originally published from October 2001 to July 2003. These articles took a consistently neoconservative line on Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as support for Israel. Like Strauss, Hanson was at odds with 'adherents of post-modernist relativism' and he contended that the War on Terror could be viewed in terms of 'good versus evil'.[101] He was suspicious of social science theory and cited Homer, Sophocles, Thucydides and Plato as 'time-honoured alternatives to modern behaviourism, Freudianism, Marxism and social construction'. Instead, the ancients taught that 'war is terrible but innate to civilization'; terrorist states were not 'economically driven' but 'rush to battle out of Thucydidean fear, envy and self-interest that in turn are fuelled by a desire for power, fame and respect'.[102]

Hanson repeatedly emphasized the superiority of Western civilization. As early as 1997, in *Who Killed Homer?*, a work looking at the state of Classics teaching in America, the arguments already suggested sympathy with Straussian and neoconservative warnings against moral relativism and multiculturalism. The authors attacked the current academic orthodoxy, that 'all cultures are equal – the West no better or worse than any other'. Arguing that the Greeks were superior to other ancient Mediterranean cultures because they were Western, they

commented that 'the ancestors of Saddam's yes-men and Iran's theocratic guard' were defeated by the West's ancestors at Marathon.[103] After 9/11, this attitude characterized Hanson's foreign policy analysis. According to him, 'all people born onto this planet seek freedom and security' and 'the western paradigm alone provides man a chance to realize these innate aspirations'.[104] Consciously echoing Thucydides,[105] Hanson argued that 'human nature is unchanging', continuing, 'its essence being raw, savage and self-serving beneath a veneer of civilization'. Again, 'Thucydides often reveals a tragic view of the human condition' in which 'culture and civilization are a thin veneer that protects us from the innate savagery of our natural selves'.[106]

As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere,[107] Hanson often subtly changed the emphasis of Thucydidean quotations or ignored uncomfortable contextual information. For example, the very literal Smith Loeb translation gives Thucydides 1.140 as 'those of you who are persuaded by what I shall say shall support the common decisions'. At this point, Pericles was telling the Athenians who favoured going to war against Sparta that they should continue to support the war even if events went against them. In Hanson's translation this became 'one must support the national resolve even in the case of reverse'.[108] This is a marked change of emphasis. In the original, Pericles was telling those who voted for the war to maintain their resolve. In Hanson's version, this caveat was dropped, with the implication that everybody, even those who had never been in favour of the war, should support it. Hanson has also drawn parallels between America and Athens in his historical works. For example, in *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War*, he observed that Americans 'like the Athenians, are all-powerful, but insecure, professedly pacifist yet nearly always in some sort of conflict, often more desirous of being liked than being respected, and proud of our arts and letters even as we are more adept at war'.[109] In contrast to Athens/America, Hanson often compared contemporary Islamic states to Sparta. In an earlier essay he described the 'millions of guest Asian and Arab helots' labouring in Saudi Arabia.[110] When describing Sparta in a work of history, he used similar language to the way he described Iraq in his political articles: Sparta was a 'quasi-police state' with 'no lively intellectual life, no notion of upward mobility and no immigration'.[111]

In spite of his repeated 'Athens as America, American enemies as Sparta' dichotomy, he was willing to ignore context and ascribe descriptions of Sparta to America when it suited him. For example, he had Thucydides tell modern Americans that 'you are alone inactive and defend yourselves not by doing anything but by looking as if you would do something; you alone wait till the power of an enemy is becoming twice its original size, instead of crushing it in its infancy'. This section was actually taken from a speech of the Corinthians urging the Spartans to go to war against Athens.[112] Hanson could also be misleading. In an article predicting an easy American victory in Afghanistan[113] he quoted Alcibiades' prediction of an easy Athenian victory in Sicily[114] – without giving the slightest intimation to his readers that Alcibiades' predictions turned out to be disastrously inaccurate.

Like the neoconservatives, Hanson placed less emphasis on structural factors in the international system and more on the internal dynamics of different states. According to Hanson, Thucydides was technically wrong in his assertion that Spartan fear of Athens was based upon growing Athenian power and he suggested that it was the spread of Athens' 'soft power', in the form of the 'sheer dynamism of Pericles' imperial culture' that the Spartans feared. They could live with Athens' expansionism, but not when combined with its 'radical ideology of support for democracy abroad'.[115] Attacking the realist uses of Thucydides, he argued that Thucydides was 'too discerning a critic to reduce strife down simply to perceptions about power and its manifestations',[116] and that 'when Athens engaged in *Realpolitik* [. . .] without the necessary revolutionary fervour of democracy, it often failed'.[117] In the subtext of Athens as America, the suggestion here was clear – America's enemies would fear it and America would be successful only when it put democracy and regime change at the top of its foreign policy agenda.

Hanson has consistently linked his notions of America with the idea of Western exceptionalism and has described Athens as 'the world's first America'.[118] He described the Greeks and Romans as 'anti-Mediterranean cultures, in the sense of being at odds with much of the political heritages of Persia, Egypt, and Phoenicia'. Whilst recognizing that Greek culture was influenced by the art, religion and architecture of its neighbours, Hanson claimed that 'its faith in consensual government and free markets was unique'. This belief in ancient exceptionalism informed his faith in American exceptionalism.

According to Hanson, 'we have forgotten the ancient truth of western exceptionalism [. . .] Americans have often made the mistake of thinking that our enemies are simply different from us, rather than far different from us'.[119]

Not only was America the successor to Greece, but Islamic terrorists were transformed into the heirs of ancient Persia. According to Hanson, if the Greeks were to lose at Salamis then,

> theocracy, censorship, and brutality would invade every facet of daily life. Such were the stakes at Salamis, and so too is the contest with the radical worldview of Islamic fundamentalists, who are as akin to ancient absolutists as Westerners are to the Greeks.[120]

And again, when Spartans were not fighting Persians, it was the Spartans who become the 'other'. Thucydides showed that 'the larger underlying differences between the two powers – perhaps not always perceptible to Athenians and Spartans themselves – would eventually lead to a cataclysm'.[121]

Besides Kagan and Hanson, other conservatives periodically used Thucydides as the archetypal theorist for a tough foreign policy. After the rapid 2003 victory over Iraq, the occupation encountered greater challenges than expected. Rather than becoming an Arab beacon of democracy, Iraq began drifting into a sectarian civil war and American casualties were mounting. In June 2006 Bush met with a group of outside experts for their views on Iraq. Frederick Kagan suggested that America needed more troops and Robert Kaplan suggested adopting more aggressive counter-insurgency tactics. Along with the views of others (for example, General Petraeus, who led the operation), these thinkers helped to convince Bush to adopt the Surge counter-insurgency strategy that eventually stemmed the violence.[122] Kaplan had earlier written a popular book, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*,[123] in which he had argued that the messy circumstances of the post-Cold War world required its leaders to re-examine Antiquity and to adopt its 'pagan ethos'. To Kaplan, this meant focusing less on the morality of means and more on the morality of the ends.

According to Kaplan, Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* 'may be the seminal work of international relations theory of all time. It is the first work to introduce a comprehensive pragmatism into political discourse.'

Thucydides had a 'persistent focus on self-interest', the Spartan and Athenian alliances were as complex as the Cold War alliances and Thucydides showed 'that decision making in Antiquity required a mastery of variables no less numerous and complex than those faced by an American president'. Likewise, his 'description of naked and labyrinthine calculations of power and interest is an apt metaphor for contemporary global politics'. Kaplan agreed with Hanson that 'civilization represses barbarism but can never eradicate it'.[124] He was also willing to positively discuss American imperialism, which was an 'ordinary and dependable form of protection for ethnic minorities and others under violent assault'. Whilst accepting that imperialism was unpopular, Kaplan contended that 'an imperial reality already dominates our foreign policy'.[125]

Since no historical analogy can be perfect, an analogy might be rhetorically powerful whilst still leaving the writer open to attacks when dissected by critics. Whilst writing about Hanson, a writer in the *American Conservative* could argue persuasively that the Peloponnesian and Iraq Wars really had very little in common, except for the aspect that Hanson played down: 'the way that our Iraq disaster resembles the Athenian invasion of Sicily'.[126] This aspect has also been picked up on by non-conservative critics. For instance, Anne Norton's critical *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* contained a chapter criticizing the Iraq War titled 'The Sicilian Expedition'.[127] However attractive the Athenians might look as democratic forebears to Americans, the invasion of Sicily and their ultimate defeat in the Peloponnesian War were obvious weaknesses to be exploited by critics. And the Athenians were not always attractive, as the 'Melian Dialogue' shows. Fukuyama turned against the Iraq War and by 2006 had turned against neoconservatism. At that point, he compared America's unilateral foreign policy to the amoral Athenian position in the 'Melian Dialogue'.[128]

Straussians and 'Regime'

Kagan and Hanson had portrayed Thucydides as a master of hawkishness and an enemy of appeasement. For Straussians, Thucydides was a more subtle thinker, less easy to apply to contemporary issues. Thucydides praised Pericles but his praise was 'compatible with preferring Sparta to Pericles and his Athens'.[129] Periclean great-heartedness might compare

to America taking on the costs and burdens of global leadership, but Spartan moderation was absent in Strauss's Pericles and it is difficult to see how Strauss's praise of moderation and restraint could be translated into the ambitious and costly American strategy of regime change. Instead, the influence of Strauss was shown in an emphasis on and extension of his concept of regime, which owed more to Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon than to Thucydides.

Alongside fear of WMD, retaliation against Saddam Hussein for past transgressions and alleged links to terrorism, regime change was one of the main justifications for invading Iraq. The idea was that Iraq could be forcibly turned into a successful liberal democracy which would be a shining example to the rest of the oppressed Middle East. It was the prominence given to debates over 'regime' which has linked it to the Straussians. For Straussians, a state's regime is both the constitutional structure of its government and the wider society which is influenced by that structure. A state's regime type shapes the way its people act and the nature and goals of its foreign policy. This differs fundamentally from the realist perspective, in which a state's foreign policy goals are shaped by interests which are largely unrelated to its political structure. Nicholas Xenos, an academic commentator critical of Strauss's influence on American foreign policy, has argued that the Straussian concept of regime was adopted by mainstream news sources and liberal writers and that the Straussians' successful transmission of this concept 'facilitated the disaster that has become US foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq'.[130]

However, there were few genuine Straussians in the Bush administration. Paul Wolfowitz has often been labelled a Straussian, despite having only ever taken two courses with Leo Strauss and having publicly described the allegations of his Straussianism as 'just laughable'.[131] Nonetheless, as an undergraduate Wolfowitz was a member of the Telluride group at Cornell, an elite group of students under the tutelage of Bloom, which in his time included Francis Fukuyama, Alan Keyes (a presidential candidate), Abram Shulsky and William Kristol. Wolfowitz was a proponent of regime change before 9/11, although he had tended to strike a more cautious note than some others.[132]

There is also the possibility that Straussians from outside the administration influenced its thinking on regime change. Straussians played key roles in influential political think-tanks and organizations

such as PNAC, and William Kristol's *Weekly Standard* was popular within the administration, with 30 copies a week delivered to the White House on the order of Vice-President Dick Cheney.[133] Kristol had been arguing for a policy of regime change to install democracies before 2001.[134] In 2003, Kristol and his co-writer pointed out that Strauss 'did not write his books in such a way as to be immediately relevant to the policy disputes of his day or ours'; however, they did suggest that a 'particularly timely example' of Strauss's thought was his notion of 'regime' and that 'Bush's advocacy of "regime change"' was a 'product of Strauss's rehabilitation of the notion of regime'.[135] In 2005, Kristol again credited Leo Strauss with influencing American foreign policy. He began his article with a quote from Strauss's *On Tyranny*: 'a social science that cannot speak of tyranny with the same confidence with which medicine speaks, for example, of cancer, cannot understand social phenomena as what they are'.[136] He then claimed that Bush's 2005 inaugural address was 'informed by Strauss' and went on to say that the speech moved 'American foreign policy beyond the war on terror to the larger struggle against tyranny'. Consequently, we might expect that it was Strauss's *On Tyranny* which contained much of relevance to the debate of regime change.

Strauss's On Tyranny

On Tyranny was ostensibly a commentary on Xenophon's *Hiero*. Strauss suggested that modern treatments of tyranny, even in an age of tyrants, had failed to recognize tyranny when it appeared. It was therefore unremarkable that contemporaries had revisited Plato and other classical writers who 'seemed to have interpreted for us the horrors of the twentieth century'. Nonetheless, he was surprised that Xenophon's *Hiero the Tyrant* was still neglected, despite being the only ancient work dedicated to tyranny. Strauss acknowledged that there were significant differences between ancient and modern tyrannies, particularly the applications by modern tyrants of technology and ideology. Notwithstanding these developments, Strauss believed that 'one cannot understand modern tyranny in its specific character before one has understood the elementary and in a sense natural form of tyranny which is premodern tyranny'. The fault lay with modern political science's rejection of value judgements, and to 'call a regime tyrannical clearly amounts to a "value judgement"'. The modern political scientist may

'as a citizen wholeheartedly condemn' totalitarian regimes, but 'as a political scientist he is forced to reject the notion of tyranny as "mythical"'. This problem goes back to the origins of modern political science in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which was 'characterized by the deliberate indifference to the distinction between king and tyrant'. In ignoring the distinction, Machiavelli was 'breaking away from the whole tradition of political science'. But one could not understand the meaning of Machiavelli's revolutionary change unless one confronted it with the ideology he rejected. Consequently, *The Prince* should be read alongside the one classical work that 'comes as near to the teaching of *The Prince* as the teaching of any Socratic could possibly come'. By doing this Strauss believed the reader could 'grasp most clearly the subtlest and indeed the decisive difference between Socratic political science and Machiavellian political science'.[137]

Strauss was at pains to explain that not all was as it seemed in Xenophon's text, whilst at the same time being cautious in providing his own interpretation. The setting of the dialogue was crucial: Simonides the poet was a guest of the tyrant Hiero of Syracuse. Since Simonides was completely in Hiero's power, we needed to be sceptical of Simonides' sincerity. Likewise, the fact that it is a dialogue rather than a treatise tells us that it included some teaching that the cautious wise man (Xenophon) would not want to express in his own name. Simonides could not openly offer to teach the tyrant because Hiero might take offence; consequently he needed Hiero to be the one to indict tyranny. Simonides therefore pretended to be less wise than he really was and adopted the vulgar opinion that tyranny was bad for the city but good for the tyrant (because it allowed him to satisfy bodily pleasures to a greater extent than private men).[138] We should also be sceptical of Hiero's indictment of tyranny. Hiero said that one of the problems of tyranny was that tyrants had to be afraid of the wise.[139] Since Simonides was wise, Hiero would not be entirely honest either: both characters were on their guard. Hiero feared the wise because they might attempt to overthrow him in order to become, or help one of their pupils become, the new tyrant. Accordingly, Hiero's response to Simonides' argument was designed to put Simonides off from wanting to become a tyrant, whereas Simonides' praise of tyranny was ironic.[140] In short, the characters began the dialogue holding the opposite views to those openly expressed.

According to Strauss, Hiero's overstated criticism of tyranny was demonstrated by comparing his views with those expressed by Xenophon in his own voice. Hiero said that all cities honoured tyrannicides, whereas Xenophon wrote that only most did so in one particular example and that the tyrant Euphron was honoured after his death.[141] Hiero said that tyrants were deprived of companionship, whereas Xenophon said that Astyages had friends.[142] Hiero said that tyrants did not enjoy winning wars but spoke only of civil wars, neglecting to mention his own famous victory against the Carthaginians at Cumae. So the exoteric indictment of tyranny was that it was an unmitigated evil for the tyrant as well as his city. In contrast, the esoteric view was a 'more qualified indictment of tyranny'. However, 'the superficial understanding is not simply wrong, since it grasps the obvious meaning which is as much intended by the author as is the deeper meaning'. Simonides' focus on the physical benefits of tyranny was an effort to reassure Hiero that he was really quite shallow. But he then drew a distinction between himself and the common man by switching his focus to power and wealth. This increased Hiero's fear and made him indict tyranny even more vehemently. Simonides also showed himself to be a tough-minded man, and therefore someone likely to be listened to by a tyrant, by responding to Hiero's points about the dangers faced by tyrants but ignoring Hiero's talk about immorality. According to Strauss, it was by 'revealing a complete lack of scruple that the poet both overwhelms Hiero and convinces him of his competence to give sound advice to a tyrant'.[143]

Simonides then taught Hiero how to be a successful tyrant. However, what Simonides taught Hiero was not the naïve lesson given exoterically, but instead a 'prudently presented lesson in political prudence'.[144] Simonides still advised Hiero to keep his mercenary bodyguard, but his advice showed Hiero how they might become popular. Just as Simonides' earlier praise of tyranny was a mask, his later praise of reformed tyranny still pointed to its problems. Simonides avoided the terms law and freedom throughout; so when he spoke of the citizens as Hiero's companions, they were really still his slaves. Such a city might be happy, but it could not be virtuous. Since it was not virtuous, it could not really be praiseworthy. Strauss suggested that 'the place occupied within republican virtue by courage is occupied within the virtue befitting the subjects of the excellent tyrant by moderation which is

produced by fear'. Ultimately, Simonides was not outlining an ideal city but showing how to minimize the damage of tyranny for both citizens and tyrant. Nonetheless, since the tyrant could effectively do what he liked, the rule of a good tyrant must be considered 'superior to, or more just than, the rule of laws'. But this was a utopian vision since Strauss's Xenophon thought that such a perfect ruler was unlikely to ever exist. The problem for Xenophon, which necessitated hiding this teaching in the form of a dialogue, was that even such a theoretically good tyrant, unlikely in reality, undermined loyalty to non-tyrannical states because it showed they were not necessarily the best states possible.[145] Since tyranny tended to be unpopular, Xenophon did not want to embrace this position publicly.

Strauss's interpretation engenders questions. If, as it appears in Strauss's commentary, Xenophon was partly pro-tyranny (at least in its best, theoretical form), why did Strauss think that he was so useful for diagnosing the pathologies of modern tyrannies? If the problem with relativistic social science was that it could not differentiate between good and bad, and that tyranny was bad, how could a treatise in which each character constantly conceals his real opinions improve matters? The answer is perhaps that in Strauss's nuanced reading, Xenophon was constantly alive to the differences between good and bad tyrants: in knowing the difference, we might better understand the problems of modern tyranny. This seems to be the approach taken by some Straussians and it is interesting that Wolfowitz, when discussing regime change, was careful to distinguish between authoritarian and totalitarian dictatorships in terms of their ability for reform.[146] Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how such an ambiguous analysis of tyranny could play the role Kristol ascribed to it in influencing American policy towards 'rogue states'.

Carnes Lord

For an illustration of how Strauss's reading of Xenophon's *Hiero* might apply in a modern context, Carnes Lord's *The Modern Prince: What Leaders Need to Know Now* is useful. Straussian echoes abounded in the work. Lord was a student of Allan Bloom's and had written the translation of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* which accompanied Strauss's commentary on it. He had worked in the Reagan and G.H.W. Bush administrations, but was Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College when *The Modern*

Prince was published. As the title proclaimed, the work was an effort to produce a manual for leadership and it claimed to be a response to 9/11 and the War on Terror. According to Lord, the 'global war on terror should force us to ponder at a fundamental level what we want and need in our political leaders'.[147] Critics of Straussianism such as Anne Norton expressed concern that a teacher of future decision makers seemed to idolize dictators like former Pakistani dictator Pervez Musharraf.[148] Besides Musharraf, Lord also praised Atatürk, Bismarck, South Korean dictators and a Singaporean authoritarian. All were examples of 'conservative modernizers' who improved their countries. Lord used examples from the ancient world because 'the character of modern leadership reveals itself fully only from a vantage point beyond itself'.[149] Regardless of Strauss's possibly ironic description of Machiavelli as a 'teacher of evil',[150] Lord focused on how Machiavelli could teach positive lessons to American leaders in the War on Terror, although he did not 'necessarily endorse all of Machiavelli's ideas'.[151]

Lord's work was fundamentally anti-pluralist, even when it claimed to be arguing for greater democracy. For example, he criticized 'contemporary leaders for their failure to provide essential checks on powerful and democratically unaccountable institutions such as the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the media, as well as the elites that dominate them'. As well as Machiavelli, Lord argued that Aristotle provided 'if not a full-blown theory of statecraft, at any rate a conceptual foundation for one'.[152] Lord agreed with Strauss in blaming social science for the contemporary dearth of leadership theory and practice because it focused on social trends and the activities of groups, rather than the practices of individuals. In addition, social science had replaced learning about statecraft from the Great Books curriculum in favour of studying the rules of social science.[153]

For Lord, the basis of statecraft was political judgement, or prudence, which was written about by Aristotle. 'Prudence differs fundamentally from scientific or theoretical knowledge. It is the faculty we use in applying general principles to particular circumstances that require decision and action'. According to Lord, Aristotle suggested that the five areas statesmen needed to examine were 'finance, foreign policy, defense, trade and constitutional law'. The knowledge of these areas is imprecise and general, rather than specific. Thus, for Lord, 'the true education of politicians derives less from any specialized training in political science

than from a general or liberal education and wide experience of the world'.[154] He also referred extensively to the Straussian concept of regime and suggested that America was a mixed regime rather than a democracy.

Lord's approval of authoritarian dictators and his disdain for the pluralist features of modern democracies, such as a free media, would seem to support the critiques of Straussianism levelled by its critics. Xenos, for instance, has argued that the assertive neoconservative foreign policy was really intended to rejuvenate America domestically and reverse its cultural decline.[155] However, we should be wary of ascribing the views of the pupil to the teacher, let alone the views of one pupil to all of his fellow pupils. Another Straussian, Steven Smith, has maintained that Strauss would have been sceptical about the 'war against evil'. Strauss mentioned evil a lot, but his purpose was to show that evil was an inevitable part of humanity and that therefore politics should be moderate in its aims rather than imagining evil could be ended.[156] Nonetheless, older Straussians like Jaffa have claimed that Strauss's resurrection of the rhetoric of evil had real-world connections. Strauss apparently thought that Churchill exemplified classical statesmanship. According to Jaffa, the conflict between Hitler and Churchill showed how 'the conflict between good and evil lies at the foundation of human experience'.[157]

We see that at least some influential commentators were appropriating ideas derived, via Leo Strauss, from Xenophon. But the ideas being promulgated were not those we might have expected based upon William Kristol's discussion of Strauss's *On Tyranny*. Whereas Kristol depicted Strauss's Xenophon as a fundamentally anti-tyrannical writer and therefore useful for diagnosing and challenging modern tyrannies, the actual lessons drawn from Strauss's followers worked on two levels. In terms of vocabulary, a superficial reading of Strauss might lead to the lessons Kristol suggested. The focus on the importance of regime fitted well with the liberal internationalist perspective (that liberal democratic governments behave differently from other types of government in the field of international affairs). For readers confident of America's exceptional nature, the lesson might have seemed to vindicate support for democratic change abroad. But the deeper theoretical lesson, evidenced in the writing of Lord, was not essentially anti-tyrannical. Lord's work in fact shows a marked preference for examples of leadership

provided by authoritarian dictators. The main criterion for inclusion was that they be pro-American dictators.

Fukuyama and the End of History

By some distance the most significant Straussian contribution to foreign policy thinking in recent decades has been crafted by Francis Fukuyama. He found a wide international audience with his 1989 *National Interest* essay, 'The End of History?', which was later expanded into a bestselling book. Fukuyama was another student of Allan Bloom's at Chicago and a colleague of William Kristol's at Harvard. Like many Straussians, he took breaks from academia to work in government, joining the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department on two occasions. In *After the Neocons: America at the Crossroads*, written after his break with neoconservatism, Fukuyama was dismissive of attempts to link Leo Strauss to the Iraq War. According to Fukuyama, 'among the reasons why it is silly to think that Strauss had an impact on the Bush administration's foreign policy is the fact that there were no Straussians serving in the administration in the lead-up to the Iraq war'.[158] As we have seen, there were actually a significant number of Straussians in the Bush administration, though none at the highest levels. Yet, even if Fukuyama's general point is accepted, it still leaves open the possibility that the administration was influenced by Straussians outside the administration (such as Fukuyama himself). Indeed, despite dismissing the Straussian influence, a few pages later he admitted that a significant idea associated with the administration did have its roots in Strauss's interpretations of Antiquity. According to Fukuyama,

> there is one particular idea associated with Strauss and Straussians that does have relevance to the foreign policy of the Bush administration: the idea of "regime". The centrality of the regime to political life comes not from Strauss but ultimately from a reading of Plato and Aristotle, both of whom talk extensively about the nature of aristocratic, monarchic, and democratic regimes and their effects on the character of the people who live under them. Both Plato and Aristotle understand a regime not in the modern way, as a set of visible formal institutions, but rather as a way of life in which formal political institutions and informal habits constantly shape one another. A democratic regime

> produces a certain kind of person: hence Socrates' famous description, in Book 8 of the *Republic*, of democratic man . . . .[159]

The title of Fukuyama's most well-known work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, suggested that its philosophical content was a contrast between or synthesis of the ideas of Georg Hegel and Nietzsche. However, it also engaged closely with ancient Greek thought and was deeply saturated with Straussian interpretations of those works. In brief, Fukuyama argued that with the end of the Cold War the final challenger to liberal democracy had been subdued and the spread of liberal democracy around the globe was now inevitable. This would essentially mean that history had ended and the rule of Nietzsche's 'last men' would soon be upon us. After some critics seemed to misunderstand the thrust of the original article, Fukuyama was at pains to point out that he was writing about History with a capital H, not history. His 'History' was a 'single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experience of all peoples in all times'. Newsworthy events would still happen, but 'there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled'.[160]

Fukuyama surmised that most of mankind was heading for liberal democracy because of economics and the 'struggle for recognition', which he had taken from Hegel's master–slave dialectic. He contended that economic interpretations did not fully account for human complexity; but instead of turning to Aristotle's account of man being a political animal, Fukuyama used Hegel's master–slave struggle for recognition to understand history. Only human beings transcend their basic needs, like the preservation of life, in return for abstract principles like honour. He then placed this Hegelian concept of human nature in ancient thought, arguing that the struggle for recognition was the *thymos* (spiritedness) of Plato's *Republic*. Fukuyama discussed Plato's description of the tripartite soul (the animalistic part dealing with basic desires, the thymotic part dealing with honour and self-worth, and the highest, reasoning part), arguing that much of the human condition could be explained by the combination of desire and reason, but that beyond this human beings seek recognition.[161] For Fukuyama, Plato's *thymos* was 'somehow related to the value one sets on oneself, what we today might call "self-esteem"'. Plato's *thymos* was the same as Hegel's 'desire for

recognition: for the aristocratic master in the bloody battle is driven by self-worth'.[162] This equivalence of terms appears questionable. Socrates compared the Guardians to guard dogs, which does not suggest that self-esteem was the key aspect of *thymos* for Plato. Whereas Plato used *thymos* to explain the Guardians' usefulness in defending the city, Fukuyama argued for a more selfish desire for recognition: 'people believe that they have a certain worth, and when other people treat them as though they are worth less than that, they feel anger [. . .] they are what drives the whole historical process'.[163]

In Fukuyama's account, the slave submitted to the master, so was not recognized as fully human. However, the master also suffered dissatisfaction because the recognition he received from his slaves came from people he considered less than fully human. The dissatisfaction of both classes 'engendered further stages of history', which, in Hegel's analysis, were satisfied by the French and American revolutions. At this point, everybody was finally recognized as fully human by granting them rights. For Fukuyama, this meaning of history differed from the Hobbesian tradition in which rights were granted to ensure a private sphere in which men could pursue commercial ambitions. According to Fukuyama, Hobbesian liberalism was deficient:

> The success of liberal politics and liberal economics frequently rests on irrational forms of recognition that liberalism was supposed to overcome. For democracy to work, citizens need to develop an irrational pride in their own democratic institutions, and must also develop what Tocqueville called the "art of associating", which rests on prideful attachment to small communities. These communities are frequently based on religion, ethnicity, or other forms of recognition that fall short of the universal recognition on which the liberal state is based.[164]

Fukuyama's view was that Nietzsche had made the most powerful criticism of Hegel's universal recognition. Nietzsche's 'last man' gives up his pride for self-preservation. He lives in comfort, avoiding extremes of wealth or poverty or the burden of ruling others, but being careful of his health. According to Nietzsche, the last men were 'most despicable'.[165] For Fukuyama, the last men retained desire and reason but lacked *thymos*. Since they were satisfied with 'happiness and unable to feel any sense of

shame for being unable to rise above those wants, the last man ceased to be human'.[166]

In spite of Fukuyama's concern over the ultimate trajectory of liberal democracy, his confidence in its ability to triumph over alternative ideologies was high. He assessed and discarded potential threats that other foreign policy commentators[167] were more concerned about. For Fukuyama, radical Islam was a thymotic response by Muslims whose pride had been offended by their failure to keep pace economically with the West. Consequently, it would always be restricted to the borders of contemporary Islam:

> It remains the case that this religion has virtually no appeal outside those areas that were culturally Islamic to begin with. The days of Islam's cultural conquests, it would seem, are over [...] they cannot challenge liberal democracy on its territory on the level of ideals. Indeed, the Islamic world would seem more vulnerable to liberal ideas in the long run than the reverse.[168]

Notwithstanding Fukuyama's faith in the superiority of liberal democracy, he was also critical of the ability of liberal democracy to provide people with meaningful lives. According to Fukuyama, contemporary wants were created from 'vanity' and were incapable of ever being fulfilled. Modern economics creates 'a new need for every want they satisfy'. Thus, people were continuously unhappy because they could never satisfy their wants.[169] If he was correct about the potential for alienation and dissatisfaction that was inherent in liberal democracies, how could he be so confident that the dissatisfied in those democracies would not be drawn to alternative ideologies? This contradiction lies at the heart of his argument. Liberal democracy was apparently deeply unsatisfying yet still much more attractive than any possible alternative ideology.

Fukuyama also contrasted the ability of other ideological belief systems to provide economic growth and he seems to have been in partial agreement with Lord about the 'considerable evidence that market-oriented authoritarian modernizers do better economically than their democratic counterparts', noting that imperial Germany, Meiji Japan and more modern examples like Pinochet's Chile were successful authoritarian states. From an economic perspective, directional history

could lead to authoritarianism – but in Fukuyama's view, it did not. He argued that the reason authoritarian states ultimately failed was because they did not satisfy the demand for *thymos*, which demanded honour.[170] We see here the influence of Strauss's reading of the *Hiero*, in which even the idealized tyrannical city outlined by Simonides remained a city of slaves. A beneficent tyrant could ensure a satisfied state but he could not ensure a truly virtuous state that would be able to satisfy the need for honour.

Fukuyama also adopted the Straussian reading of Hobbes. In the Hobbesian view, humans' capacity for reason was simply a way of achieving the ends provided by nature, like self-preservation. Hobbes saw nothing 'morally redeeming' in personal pride and instead viewed it as the root of much unnecessary violence. For Fukuyama's Hobbes, self-preservation was 'the strongest moral imperative' and all other concepts like justice or right derived were only valid in so far as they assisted self-preservation. In contrast, for Hegel

> freedom was not just a psychological phenomenon, but the essence of what was distinctively human. In this sense, freedom and nature are diametrically opposed [. . .] Human freedom emerges only when man is able to transcend his natural, animal existence and to create a new self for himself. The emblematic starting point for this process of self-creation is the struggle to the death for pure prestige.[171]

But, in Fukuyama's view, the Hobbesian formulation had been more influential in the liberal democracies of the modern world. Locke adopted Hobbes' ethos, simply replacing Hobbes' monarchism with parliamentary sovereignty. This account would seem to imply that Fukuyama was critical of the Hobbesian aspects of liberal democracy, which could perhaps be rectified by focusing more on man's Hegelian need for recognition. However, although Hobbes and Hegel apparently disagreed over fundamental human needs, the practical result of the Hobbesian approach had been equality, which seemed to satisfy the Hegelian demand for universal recognition.

Nonetheless, instead of returning to Hegel, at this point in his argument Fukuyama turned to Plato. According to Fukuyama, *thymos* was a positive attribute, necessary for society to function well. However,

modern liberalism had sought to exclude it. Moderns had confused *thymos* with desire, when 'in fact, the self-assertion arising from *thymos* and the selfishness of desire are very distinct phenomena'. As an example, Fukuyama used Platonic *thymos* to argue that when workers went on strike for higher wages, they were seeking not simply to gratify their material desires, but also to demand greater recognition of their worth. The problem of rising expectations, usually considered a purely economic problem, was 'as much a *thymotic* phenomenon as one arising out of desire'. Likewise, the indignity of racism and the anger arising from it in America were a result of *thymos* as much as the material conditions suffered by blacks. Rational, economic people would work and adapt to any system, but it was only 'thymotic man' who would be willing to risk his life and bring down authoritarian regimes.[172]

Nonetheless, *thymos* had its drawbacks and Fukuyama applied another Greek term, *megalothymia*, to describe people not content to share the equal recognition of democracy. For Fukuyama, a successful society needed to both cultivate and tame its citizens' *thymos*, which was why 'the greater part of the first six books of the *Republic* is devoted to the proper thymotic education of the guardian class'. Socrates spent so long on *thymos* in the *Republic* because it was 'crucial for the construction of his just city'. It was 'an innately political virtue necessary for the survival of any political community'. Machiavelli, instead of seeking to educate people's *thymos*, sought to use the bad aspects of people to build political order using institutions: *thymos* would be ranged against *thymos* in mixed republics. In contrast, Hobbes and Locke sought to 'eradicate *thymos* altogether'. According to Fukuyama, the 'greatest and most articulate champion of *thymos* in modern times, and the prophet of its revival, was Friedrich Nietzsche'. For Nietzsche, 'the very essence of man was neither his desire nor his reason, but his *thymos*'.[173] In his disdain for the thinness of contemporary liberal life and his sympathy for the Nietzschean analysis, his thought contained much in common with that of his teacher Allan Bloom. Like Bloom, he accepted Nietzsche's 'acute psychological observations' whilst claiming to 'reject his morality'.[174]

The key question was not whether History had ended (for Fukuyama, it had – liberal democracy reigned triumphant), but how liberal democracies would cope with *thymos*. Whilst other political alternatives were available, *thymos* could find an outlet in fighting Nazism or communism. Without such critical threats, Fukuyama's fear was that

people would either become Nietzsche's contemptible last men, or find dangerous new outlets for their *thymos*. Fukuyama believed that people could still satisfy their demands for recognition through politics, business, celebrity or art, although these outlets were threatened by rising egalitarianism. Alternatively, *thymos* might be eradicated and people would become the empty vessels Nietzsche warned against. Finally, people's *thymos* would find a dangerous outlet in returning to barbarism, killing for recognition.[175]

Modern relativism made the political route less likely, because our knowledge of the past has made us realize how petty our horizons are. The great deeds of the past, undertaken for beliefs now considered nonsense, would not be repeated. For Fukuyama, 'the loyalties that drove men to desperate acts of courage and sacrifice were proven by subsequent history to be silly prejudices'. 'The founders of modern liberalism understood, in effect, that Alcibiades' desire for recognition might have been better directed toward manufacturing the first steam engine or microprocessor', which seems to suggest that he believed that option two, thymotic recognition through business, celebrity or art, was still a possibility in the modern world. Nonetheless, he argued it was in 'the realm of foreign policy that democratic politicians can still achieve a degree of recognition unavailable in virtually any other walk of life'. Victories like those of Churchill over Hitler were 'far beyond' any recognition available to entrepreneurs. Thus the historical world (the parts without liberal democracy) would still be an attractive avenue for recognition for Western politicians.[176] A somewhat frightening possible implication of his argument is that foreign wars could be justified on the basis of Western leaders' need for self-fulfilment.

However, Fukuyama still viewed the return of the first men as a possibility, particularly following on from a period dominated by the last men: 'following Aristotle, we might postulate that a society of the last men composed entirely out of desire and reason would give way to one of bestial first men seeking recognition alone, and vice versa, in unending oscillation'.[177] To avoid such a prospect, the American elite needed to accept that it was the strong religious belief of former generations of Americans which had created the community life necessary for liberal democracy to thrive. The Lockean principles in the founding coexisted in tension with religious bonds and would have been dysfunctional without them. A strengthening of community life in

America would need a more religious citizenry and for that to happen Americans needed to 'accept the return of certain historical forms of intolerance'.[178]

Without a religious revival, relativism 'must ultimately end up undermining democratic and tolerant values as well'.[179] Whereas Nietzsche favoured the rule of *thymos*, Fukuyama cited Plato to argue that *thymos* in itself was neither good nor bad, but had to be 'trained so that it would serve the common good' and be 'ruled by reason, and made an ally of desire'. For him, following Plato, the best regime was the one which 'best satisfied all three parts of the soul simultaneously'. Despite its imperfections, liberal democracy meets that standard: not perhaps the best regime 'in speech' but the best 'in reality'. No actual liberal democracy really has absolute equality of recognition and all in fact allow some scope for *megalothymia*, 'even if this runs contrary to the principles they profess to believe in'.[180] Hence, we see in Fukuyama the same concerns that motivated Bloom and Strauss: relativism was undermining public orthodoxy and egalitarianism was undermining respect for greatness. To reverse the trends, Americans needed to reinvigorate their public orthodoxy. Ancient thinkers, with their development of esoteric writing, could show modern intellectuals how to support the necessary public myths whilst still remaining sceptical philosophers.

Like Bloom though, Fukuyama was not a perfect fit for the Right. Although he had signed the 1998 PNAC letter to President Clinton which urged Iraqi regime change, he later claimed never to have been persuaded by the arguments for the Iraq War. After the invasion, he stopped calling himself a neoconservative and became critical of the Bush administration.[181] In a question and answer session attended by the author, Fukuyama responded to an audience question about the possibility of the Republicans gaining power and reforming American institutions with: 'The Republicans are crazy!'[182] According to Fukuyama, the neoconservatives had 'vastly overestimated the ability of America's conventional military power to achieve the political ends they sought in the Middle East, particularly the goal of bringing about broad-ranging political transformation toward democracy'.[183]

Plato, Intelligence and Regime

Criticism of the neoconservatives also focused on their supposed use, through Strauss, of Plato's 'noble lie' as a justification for lying about the

existence of WMD in Iraq. Within the administration, regime change and Saddam's alleged connections to al-Qaeda had also been important issues for different groups; but, according to Wolfowitz, 'for bureaucratic reasons we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction, because it was the one reason everyone could agree on'.[184] This decision would come back to haunt the administration when it became clear that Iraq's WMD were non-existent by 2003.

Rather than accept that the estimates may have simply been wrong, or that politicians do not need to read Plato to tell untruths, the Straussian connection was often talked up as the explanation for the apparent dishonesty of the Bush administration. Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, talking about allegations that the Labour government used 'sexed-up' intelligence to justify the invasion of Iraq, wondered whether Tony Blair, like the neoconservatives in the Bush administration, was

> a disciple of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Strauss was a champion of the "noble lie" – the idea that it is practically a duty to lie to the masses because only a small elite is intellectually fit to know the truth. Politicians must conceal their views, said Strauss, for two reasons: to spare the people's feelings and to protect the elite from possible reprisals.[185]

There are two main problems with ascribing to the Straussian neoconservatives this use of Platonic deception to further foreign policy goals. The first is that it rests on a skewed reading of Plato, not shared by the Straussians, which reflected earlier twentieth-century attacks on his apparent political dishonesty. According to Popper, 'nothing is more in keeping with Plato's totalitarian morality than his advocacy of propaganda lies'.[186] Richard Crossman described the noble lie as 'the most savage and the most profound attack upon liberal ideas which history can show'.[187] Instead, the lie is noble because it 'communicates in symbolic form truths about the good city, its foundation in human nature, and the behaviour it requires'.[188] In addition, as Williams has argued, the noble lie in the *Republic* rests on an assumption of virtuous, incorruptible rulers, whereas in the later *Laws* Plato had come to a more sceptical understanding of the limits of human nature. This led to a different attitude towards political deception: the noble lie was incompatible with a fallible humanity.[189] Secondly, the evidence from

the writings of the Straussians who wrote on intelligence suggested that 'regime' rather than 'noble lie' is a better explanation for the neoconservatives' claims about WMD in Iraq. As believers in esoteric readings, deception on some scale pervaded all Straussian interpretations of ancient works; but it served a philosophical goal, as we saw in Chapter 2.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that some Straussians have used ancient thought and Straussian methodology to support a more politicized approach to intelligence estimates. Although the connection between the Straussians and the 'noble lie' is overblown, there was a link between Strauss's readings of ancient philosophy and the Straussians' relationship to intelligence analysis. Their focus on 'regime' as the defining political interpretative tool has played an important role in Straussian works on intelligence gathering, and some of them played roles in building an intelligence assessment unit which ran parallel to the CIA and offered analyses which better suited the direction in which the administration wished to move. In works pre-dating the second Iraq War, neoconservatives who later served in the Bush administration used a Straussian perspective to critique modern intelligence work for its over-reliance on social science methods and its under-appreciation of ancient ideas of regime.

Abram Shulsky was a student of Strauss and Allan Bloom who had worked for the Democrats on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in the early 1980s and then on arms control initiatives for the Defense Department and as a consultant to the Bush Senior White House. In the Bush II administration, he founded a study group which evolved into the Office of Special Plans (OSP). The OSP was set up to analyse intelligence data that had not been vetted by the CIA. The idea was that the OSP would assess the data from a different perspective and provide alternative conclusions. It was this parallel intelligence team which disagreed with CIA estimates of Iraqi WMD and provided much of the intelligence justifying the decision to invade Iraq. He had also outlined his intelligence outlook and methodology in works written before the 2003 invasion. He disagreed with what he saw as the dominant viewpoint at the CIA that intelligence work 'should be a universal social science that seeks to understand, and ultimately to predict, all sorts of political, economic, social, and military matters'.[190]

In contrast, Shulsky asserted that 'intelligence is primarily about the discovery and protection of secrets.'[191] Like Strauss, Shulsky downplayed the capabilities of social science methodology and in particular the fact–value distinction, which did 'little to illuminate the appropriate roles of intelligence and policy' because the overarching values were 'so self-evident'. This led to a situation in which 'what policy-makers do is not so clearly separated from what experts do'. According to Shulsky

> while the intelligence analyst may often feel that the policymaker's attachment to a policy leads him to ignore or to try to distort or suppress relevant information, policymakers may feel that although intelligence often only offers tenuous judgments, policymakers are expected to treat those judgments as gospel and to make decisions accordingly. In many of these cases, it is not clear why the intelligence judgment should be treated as more authoritative or objective than anyone else's, including the policymaker's.[192]

This may be the key section, summing up the attitude which was criticized over a decade later for enabling overtly politicized intelligence analysis to distort the evidence for WMD in Iraq. It also explains the appeal of Shulsky to politicians: he privileged the plans of policy makers over the analysis of intelligence agencies. Furthermore, in his view, having an independent intelligence service 'carries some disadvantages', including 'the risk that the intelligence work will become, or will be perceived as, irrelevant to the policy process'. To counter this risk, 'intelligence must concentrate its efforts on finding and analysing information relevant to implementing the policy'.[193]

Shulsky also argued that intelligence agencies fell into the trap of accepting data provided by their adversaries and that policy makers had to remain aware that they could 'rarely be completely confident of the solidity of the foundations on which they are building; they must remain open to the possibility that their evidence is misleading'. Besides his concern that CIA evidence might be unreliable, he held a somewhat inconsistent concern that intelligence analysts were too concerned with accuracy; they did not appreciate that 'truth is not the goal but rather only a means toward victory'.[194] This would seem to suggest that the commitment to truth needed to be balanced by other factors, with

the implication that less factually accurate analyses might be the result. The view that intelligence reports should serve political goals does not need a philosophical underpinning, so this does not mean that Plato's noble lie played a role in this perspective. In summary, Shulsky distrusted the methodologies of the CIA, thinking they were prone to being deceived by their enemies. But at the same time, the goal of intelligence was to go along with what the policy makers wanted, with truth only one possible means to that end.

In 1999, Shulsky, along with another Straussian, Gary Schmitt, contributed a paper[195] on Strauss's influence on intelligence analysis to a volume on Strauss's legacy. Schmitt had left the University of Dallas to work on Reagan's National Advisory Board for Foreign Intelligence and in the 1990s was the director of the Project for the New American Century. Their paper went into great depth on exactly how Strauss's political thought informed their approach to intelligence. They began with a discussion of Sherman Kent, a Yale historian and former member of the OSS (the forerunner to the CIA) during World War II, whom they thought largely responsible for bringing social science methodology into intelligence gathering. Kent had 'disparaged the more traditional types of intelligence information, i.e., the types of secret or "inside" information that could only be gathered by spies able to penetrate the foreign government's inner circle and/or steal its documents'. Instead, he relied upon publicly available social and economic evidence that Shulsky had disparaged in his earlier work. Using social science analysis of wider economic and social trends, Kent thought he could predict policy decisions before a foreign government made them, i.e. he 'could understand the decision making process better than the decision makers themselves'. Shulsky's criticism of Kent's approach was surely a deliberate echo of Strauss's criticism of historicists who claimed to be able to understand older thinkers better than they understood themselves. Kent 'explicitly downplayed the importance of the possibility of deception', just like Strauss's modern critics who disbelieved his claims about ancient esotericism. Since Kent 'thought intelligence analysis should deal with fundamental issues (such as a nation's capabilities and interests) rather than ephemera (what one of its leaders said yesterday), he believed that intelligence analysts could be equally unconcerned with the possibility of deception on the part of the governments they were studying'. Strauss did not write about

intelligence analysis, but Schmitt and Shulsky asserted what he would have said based 'squarely on the developments in social science that Strauss attacked'. Modern intelligence analysts ignored the 'differences among "regimes"', thinking erroneously that they could deduce political behaviour based on universally applicable rules. Finally, they ignored Strauss's esotericism, which suggested that 'deception is the norm in political life'.[196]

Consequently, it can be seen that the Straussian adoption of the ancient Greek emphasis on the importance of regime in interpreting state action, for example that tyrants will control information and deceive observers more effectively than democracies, as well as the belief in esoteric writing and distrust of social scientific analysis, helped to create a methodological justification for undermining CIA estimates and overstating Iraq's destructive capabilities. However, we must be careful not to over-emphasize the significance of this Straussian influence. There were also practical reasons for doubting CIA estimates and a tradition in Republican circles of putting together alternative analysis teams to provide second opinions. For example, in 1976 three groups of intelligence analysts were set up to provide competing estimates of Soviet power as it was felt that the CIA were consistently underestimating Soviet capabilities. Team B, which included Paul Wolfowitz, adopted a much more speculative approach to involving greater use of hypotheticals. This methodology was later also used by the Office of Special Plans at the Pentagon to investigate links between al-Qaeda and Iraq.

Distrust of CIA estimates was understandable following a history of earlier intelligence failures. According to Frum, the CIA 'had consistently underestimated the danger from Iraq', including its belief in the 1980s that the 1981 Israeli strike on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor had destroyed the Iraqi nuclear campaign; when Iraqi records were obtained after the 1991 Gulf War, they showed that Iraq had immediately begun a new programme. In addition, the CIA believed the Iraqis when they said in 1991 that they had stopped their biological weapons programme – until a defector in 1995 told them otherwise.[197] Finally, there were genuine, if limited, reasons for believing that there might have been links between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 terrorists. The Czech intelligence service claimed that al-Qaeda operatives, including one of the 9/11 bombers, had met with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague in April 2001.[198] So again, we have an example of

multiple background narratives coming together out of expediency. Nationalist hawks distrustful of the CIA and Straussians critical of CIA methodology, as well as pressures from other factions in favour of regime change, created pressure and a justification to amplify the intelligence data on the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Greek Ideas in Perspective

Greece and Greek ideas have been used in multiple ways since the end of the Cold War. Notwithstanding the clear exaggerations of the Straussians' debt to Thucydides, their engagement with Greek thought was evident in many of their foreign policy writings, most prominently in the work of Fukuyama. In many respects this was a logical extension of a Straussian project going back to Strauss himself in the 1940s. Strauss had hoped that the ancients could be used against relativism, which he had linked to all the modernist movements threatening the West (see Chapter 2). Bloom had continued this fight in the field of higher education (Chapter 4); but, by then, the Cold War background was less prominent and the battle seemed to be against the inner paradoxes at the heart of Westernness. Finally, with the USSR defeated, Fukuyama used the ancients to critique modern liberalism in an effort to stop the West from decaying into a society of Last Men. For all three writers, the real poison came from within Western liberal democratic thought, to which the ancients were the antidote. The foreign menaces were a means to rouse the West to action. Both foreign policy interventionism and a higher education focus on the 'Great Books' were attempts to combat the relativistic malaise.

The neoconservatives, including Fukuyama, used their time out of power in the 1990s to develop a 'foreign policy agenda involving concepts like regime change, benevolent hegemony, unipolarity, pre-emption, and American exceptionalism that came to be hallmarks of the Bush administration's foreign policy'. However, the neoconservatives mischaracterized the extent of the threats facing America, 'failed to anticipate the virulently negative global reaction to its exercise of "benevolent hegemony"' and failed to understand the scale of the work involved in rebuilding Iraq.[199]

However, we should be careful not to over-stress the influence of Straussians, or even neoconservatives, on US foreign policy. They have

been an important strand of conservative thought, contributing to key debates, but their success also testifies to the ways in which their concerns mirrored the concerns of conservatives of other backgrounds. Politicians did not need Straussian secret teachings to moralize or extol the benefits of democracy. When Reagan declared that 'the real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root it is a test of moral will and faith',[200] a more Straussian statement would be difficult to imagine. But there is no evidence that Reagan ever read Strauss. The statement is taken from his famous speech describing the USSR as an 'evil empire', given at the 1983 convention of the National Association of Evangelicals. George W. Bush was himself an evangelical with a strong faith. The Straussian intellectual language of moral renewal made a working alliance with the Christian Right run smoothly. The power of moral narrative also underlay many of the paradoxical uses of classical thought in American foreign policy. Whilst American administrations have not always acted from altruistic motives and, indeed, the realist school has tended to hold sway at the State Department since the beginning of the Cold War, the belief in American moral exceptionalism was a powerful rhetorical tool. In this respect at least, the neoconservatives were largely correct about the power of exceptionalism.

Facing accusations of American imperialism, in which critics have compared America to ancient Rome, neoconservatives tended to use Athens as a more positive analogy for American benevolent hegemony. At the same time, Thucydides was claimed as their favourite foreign policy thinker, although the links to his thought were often tenuous, as in the Straussian example. Instead, a stronger influence on neoconservative foreign policy was the Straussian-derived focus on regime, which Fukuyama ascribed to Plato and Aristotle.

Historical parallels could be used to support or oppose particular courses of action, but could also sometimes cause unintended problems: if the moral integrity of the power compared to America was suspect or if the historical episode ended badly for the proxy-America. There was a two-pronged pressure for at least the semblance of a moral foreign policy: the Straussian need for morality to act as a cloak for self-interest and the need to cater to the belief in American exceptionalism, which demanded that foreign policy interventions had moral underpinnings. Nonetheless, there was a tension between contentions that America was the heir and apex of the best of the West and accusations of cultural

chauvinism. The USA was constantly walking a tightrope between encouraging or imposing democracy and acting in its own interests. Attempts to solve this dilemma involved merging interests with ethical concerns, which occasionally was a successful unifier (although even in the fight against communism the tensions between *realpolitik* and moralistic crusading often erupted). But it also led to recriminations: giving multiple reasons to satisfy different groups for the invasion of Iraq only briefly unified those groups.

Whilst not essential to a belief in American exceptionalism, faith in America's ability to go it alone and succeed was intertwined with exceptionalism in neoconservative minds. Neoconservatives might have disagreed about whether to label America an empire or a hegemon, but there was broad agreement about its overwhelming power vis-à-vis the rest of the globe. As it turned out, the neoconservatives were correct that toppling Saddam Hussein's regime would be fairly straightforward; but the ensuing occupation turned into a significant drain on both American treasure and on Americans' confidence in foreign intervention. Joseph Nye's pre-war argument that America was still reliant on the goodwill of weaker states[201] looks to have been vindicated by later events.

Athens was used to provide historical parallels for America because imperialism, associated with Rome, was a discredited concept. This use of hegemony tended to focus on Athens as a hegemonic leader whilst ignoring the Athenian experience. Even if the Athenian empire started as a benevolent hegemony (a fact disputed by some historians), it had certainly turned into an empire within a few years of its founding: the Delian League which Athens led became an empire which Athens dominated. As was seen with the eventual coalition which invaded Iraq, which did not include a number of fellow NATO members such as Germany and France, America's allies had the freedom to take part in or abstain from American expeditions. In this sense, a better analogy, as Kagan pointed out, for America's leadership of its allies would be the example of the Spartan-led Peloponnesian League at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, in which Sparta's leadership was more tenuous than that of Athens.

The image of Athens and the specific lessons of Thucydides become difficult to separate. The Bush Doctrine, which Bush first outlined in a speech at West Point in 2002 and which was formalized a few months later in the updated *National Security Strategy of the United States*, argued

that America should launch a pre-emptive attack in cases where she judged that a foreign power was an imminent threat. Again, it would be straightforward to draw a comparison with Thucydides' explanation of the main cause of the Peloponnesian War. The Spartans decided on war because of 'the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta'.[202] The Spartans apparently had their own Bush Doctrine. In reality, these similarities in external power relationships could not be made because of the accepted dissimilarity in the internal nature of American and Spartan rule: as we have seen, Athens has been the analogy of choice for the land of the free.

According to Morley, there have been two types of Thucydides reader: those who read a single message running through the text, embodied in key episodes, and those who emphasize the complexity of the text and the need for a deep engagement to root out its hidden meanings.[203] Even within the neoconservative movement, Morley's observation has held true. Whilst writers like Hanson and Donald Kagan drew analogies between specific historical examples and modern parallels, the Straussian wing has tended to read Thucydides in a more nuanced fashion. The dubious success of the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq did not lead to Thucydides being discarded by foreign policy commentators, but to a reinvention and re-appropriation of his text by critics of the neoconservatives.[204] This is an old pattern. According to Morley, the fact that various opposing groups use Thucydides as an authority may be a problem beyond the well-known difficulty and complexity of the text. For Morley, any text that is open to such divergent interpretations should be used with extreme caution.[205]

More optimistically, in *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*, the authors argued for the usefulness of history for guiding political actors. Their point was that modern actors have tended to ignore the lessons of history, learn the wrong lessons or apply them inaptly. The book was an attempt to rectify that by showing them 'how to use experience, whether remote or recent, in the process of deciding what to do'.[206] For Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, Thucydides offered a good approach. Whilst accepting that 'the exact analogies do not hold', the authors contended that Thucydides provided 'some immunity against imagining that this week's crisis is the worst, or last, in human affairs'. The 'dilemmas of human governance' do remain constant.[207]

Part of the explanation for such dissimilar interpretations of Thucydides relates to the aims of the interpreter. Thucydides has been read within a broadly phil-Athenian context. It is not enough to take the realist position, in which the internal dynamics of states hardly matter in comparison with their external power relationships: such a reading would see America taking on multiple roles, sometimes Athens, sometimes Sparta. But for most conservative writers after the Cold War, with the notable exception of Kagan, America could only be Athens. Even the hawkish Hanson had to read Thucydides through the prism of the wider Athenian cultural context. If a reader were mining the Peloponnesian War for eternal lessons, the place of Athens could potentially be taken by any other state without altering the moral of the lesson. Nonetheless, this was not how it worked in practice. Even where the historical analogy could be separated completely from the moral or amoral behaviour of the state under consideration, thinkers have still tended to use examples in which states could be held to show a familial ideological link to America. For critics of American foreign policy, America was the Roman Empire; for supporters it was Athens. In reality, Athens and Rome were both aggressive powers: what mattered was the perception of these states in the conservative public's consciousness. In that sense, American foreign policy debates tended to follow American education debates in depositing Athens upon a pedestal to be revered.

Finally, in spite of differences in their philosophical outlooks and in the way they used Thucydides, Hanson and the Straussians at least partially agreed on the necessity of America going abroad to find dragons to slay. For Hanson, war was a tragic but ineradicable feature of human life, which could never for long be avoided. America needed to face this fact, which meant making war on its enemies before they had a chance to grow stronger. For the Straussians, as we have seen, war could potentially be eradicated, but only at the cost of eradicating the *thymos* which made humans human. The modern West was running out of competition, which raised the possibility of Western man becoming the contemptible 'last man' described by Nietzsche. Part of the answer for the Straussians was an active foreign policy in which heroic statesmen could sate their *thymotic* needs and the public could be re-moralized by making war upon rogue states.

EPILOGUE

> I love the Greeks. Oh, do I love them [. . .] don't forget, I come from New York – that's all I see is Greeks, they are all over the place.
>
> Donald Trump[1]

As I approached the end of this book, it was tempting to believe that Greek ideas and the example of Greece would in the future play a smaller role in American conservatism. During the final days of the George W. Bush presidency, neoconservatism had become almost a dirty word due to the ongoing quagmire in Iraq and, as his second term ended in the midst of a financial crisis and a large federal stimulus package, the Tea Party movement began to successfully challenge established Republican groups by calling for a return to small government libertarianism. As its name suggested, the Tea Party that opposed both Obama and 'the Establishment' of the Republican Party looked to the past for inspiration, but the past it harked back to was almost exclusively that of the late eighteenth century. More recently, despite Donald Trump's avowed love for the Greeks, his speeches and, perhaps more importantly, his tweets, have not exactly been peppered with references to classical Greece. However history eventually judges Donald Trump, it is unlikely that he will be listed among its premier intellectuals. On the contrary, both supporters and critics have tended to represent Trumpism as an anti-intellectual, populist movement, which his off-the-cuff comments and Twitter tirades have done nothing to contradict.

Longer-term changes also seemed to be making appeals to Greece less compelling. For decades, key themes for conservatives have been the dumbing down of education and the downgrading of the Classics from its once privileged place in the higher education curriculum. The rhetorical impact of an invocation of 'the ancient' will often depend upon the audience's familiarity with Antiquity, so without a wide readership familiar with the source material, it can be expected that such invocations in political writing will diminish. And, in comparison with Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and even Richard Weaver, today's conservative debates may appear somewhat lightweight. Looking ahead then, it might appear likely that Greek thought, whether as rhetorical window-dressing or through the attempts at unmediated and critical engagements with Greek authors, will decline in importance. Conservatism's growth since its post-World War II nadir, developing from a small, overlooked and ineffective faction on the Right into a mass, popular movement, as well as the more recent emergence of social media, have perhaps necessitated a more populist approach in which political language has become shallower but broader. Even so, ancient Greek ideas may have suffused the conservative movement in more subtle ways. Even when they are unknown to the speaker, we can still determine the classical appropriations underpinning modern usages. For example, when modern conservatives decry the 'moral relativism' of the Left we trace their ideas back to thinkers like Weaver and Strauss and their engagement with Plato.

This may be overly pessimistic. As we have seen, the liberal arts tradition is not as endangered as it has sometimes been depicted. Consequently, if conservatism continues to reconceive itself, it seems likely that at least some thinkers will continue to engage deeply with the ancient world. According to social theorist Bruno Latour, the processes of group formation leave 'many more traces in their wake than already established connections which, by definition, might remain mute and invisible'. Latour continued that, 'when groups are formed or redistributed, their spokesperson looks rather frantically for ways to *de-fine* them. Their boundaries are marked, delineated, and rendered fixed and durable.'[2] Looking back, Greek ideas have tended to be used most fruitfully during periods of reinvention and group formation, such as after World War II, when conservatives abandoned isolationism; during the formation of neoconservatism in the 1970s; and in the

aftermath of the Cold War on foreign policy debates in the 1990s. We will only know in retrospect if Trump's rise signifies another Republican reformation but, if it does, perhaps I have been too hasty in writing off the prospects for Greek thought on the American Right. Trump's entry into American politics has been so abrupt, and commentary on it so bound up with his personality, that it is easy to overlook the wider debates within the conservative movement that his emergence has occasioned. Moving away from Trump's individual foibles, it is clear that his rapid rise to power has illuminated a number of themes which this book has examined in earlier periods. At the same time, as we shall see, it has also scrambled a number of old alliances, suggesting perhaps that the next few years may indeed turn out to be one of those turbulent but fruitful periods of ideological ferment in which Greek ideas will play a larger role in re-examining and transforming the meaning of American conservatism.

The evidence for this is strongest when looking at campaign rhetoric on matters of policy, with Trump's early denunciations of free trade, immigration and foreign intervention all challenging a Republican orthodoxy which had stood firm for decades (despite occasional tremors triggered by mavericks such as Patrick Buchanan in the 1990s). However, he has so far proven less radical as president, even in terms of his administration's adoption of Greek ideas. Despite early talk of isolationism, the early entrance of Thucydides as a guiding light for the Trump foreign policy team suggests that a radical break with the past will not be forthcoming. Graham Allison, who worked for both the Reagan and Clinton administrations, has been invited to talk about the lessons of the Peloponnesian War to the National Security Council staff. Similarly, a number of high-ranking administration officials, including Defense Secretary James Mattis, senior national security adviser H.R. McMaster and former White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, are apparently avid and devoted readers of Thucydides.[3] Reflecting again the flexibility of Thucydides, Allison's version is much closer to the old Cold War realist Thucydides than the neoconservative Thucydides of the George W. Bush administration; however, he views America (Sparta) as the ruling power which feels threatened by the rising power of China (Athens). According to Allison, this rising/fading power dynamic (the so-called 'Thucydides Trap') makes war between them almost inevitable.[4]

Likewise, Trump's important 'Warsaw Speech'[5] of 2017 also fits neatly into certain strands of the conservative tradition. The speech was very much concerned with 'the West' and with the 'dire threats' against it. These dangers included but also went beyond state-led aggression and non-state terrorism to comprise less tangible threats originating 'from inside or out, from the South or the East, that threaten over time to undermine these values and to erase the bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are'. These hazardous forces, if unchallenged, would 'undermine our courage, sap our spirit, and weaken our will to defend ourselves and our societies'. Some critics quickly dubbed aspects of the speech chauvinistic, and condemned Trump for leaving unmentioned the troubling aspects of Western history such as slavery and imperialism. Instead, Trump labelled the West the 'greatest community' and praised it because,

> We write symphonies. We pursue innovation. We celebrate our ancient heroes, embrace our timeless traditions and customs, and always seek to explore and discover brand new frontiers. We reward brilliance. We strive for excellence, and cherish inspiring works of art that honor God. We treasure the rule of law and protect the right to free speech and free expression.

This mention of 'ancient heroes' and the possibly Platonic echo in 'timeless' may be the faintest of references to Antiquity; however, in its tone and its concerns it very closely echoes similar ideas expressed by conservatives such as William Bennett and Victor Davis Hanson. Like these thinkers and the Straussians, Trump viewed the greatest threat to the West as its lack of 'will'; but, unlike them, the tone is highly optimistic. Trump was supremely confident that 'our civilization will triumph'.

In 2015, when Trump still appeared to hold only an outside chance of clinching the Republican nomination, Hanson had argued that 'we are in a cycle of western decline, waiting either for another Churchill, Thatcher, or Reagan to scold us out of it'.[6] Whether or not Hanson viewed Trump as a new Churchill, Thatcher or Reagan, he found much to admire in Trump's Warsaw Speech.[7] He was in no doubt that the speech heralded a positive change from the Obama administration and he viewed Trump's speech as a direct retort to Obama's 2009 Cairo

Speech. Obama's speech, according to Hanson, was 'designed to win over the Muslim world and set Obama apart from the supposed western chauvinism of the prior and much caricatured George W. Bush administration'. Hanson viewed Trump's speech as a reminder of 'western exceptionalism'. For Hanson, as always, the West is a very distinct entity in comparison with the rest of the world, distinguished by its 'system that promotes self-criticism and rationalism, free expression, market capitalism, the rule of law, and consensual government rather than gender apartheid, tribalism, autocracy, statism, and religious intolerance'. Whereas Trump spoke in general terms of 'the West', Hanson drew direct comparisons with ancient Greece. For example, modern Western weakness of will echoed a similar loss of will from the Greek city-state preceding its devastating loss to the monarchical Macedonians at the Battle of Chaeronea. Likewise, Trump's generalized discussion was expressed more forcefully by Hanson:

> From the pessimistic Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle to the glum Roman critics like Petronius, Tacitus, Juvenal, and Suetonius to the German nihilists such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Spengler, the inherent challenge of the West was rarely the permanent end of freedom and material wealth. Instead, the difficulty has been largely that we have the burden to use properly our bounty and must decide how to handle unchecked personal liberty and comfort.

Perhaps the most interesting reaction to Trump has been that of the Straussians, in which the differences between East Coast and West Coast Straussians have re-emerged with mutual rancour. From very early on, East Coast Straussians such as William Kristol (as well as establishment conservatives associated with *National Review*) were prominent in the 'Never Trump' movement and they refused to endorse him even after all of his Republican challengers had faded away. In contrast, a number of West Coast Straussians, including Angelo Codevilla, Larry Arne (President of conservative-leaning Hillsdale College) and Charles Kesler (editor of the West Coast Straussian *Claremont Review of Books*), embraced Trump quite early on. Shortly before the election, a pro-Trump Straussian, writing under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus, wrote an article explaining his decision to support Trump.[8] For Mus, America

faced a number of fundamental problems, including rising national debt, ever-growing government and out of control immigration, which mainstream politicians had proven incapable of solving. He recognized that Trump represented a political risk, but believed that Trump offered a slim chance to alter course whereas a Clinton win would have made America's problems permanently insoluble (by legalizing and importing more immigrants who would overwhelmingly vote Democrat). In a follow-up piece,[9] Mus portrayed the central political question as 'Aristotelian': 'Who rules? The many or the few? The people or the oligarchs? [. . .] The administrative state says: experts must rule.' This made Aristotle sound like a democrat but, as we saw in Chapter 1, Aristotle was at best a fairly reluctant democrat. For Mus, Republicans needed to put aside policy differences and focus, like Aristotle, on 'the Good'.

Part of the explanation for this bitter dispute over the nomination of Donald Trump lay in the Straussians' divergent assessments of the relationship between Greek philosophy and the US Constitution. As we saw in Chapter 3, the followers of Leo Strauss engaged in a process of re-examining the American Founding which had consequences for twentieth and twenty-first century political positions. Whilst all Straussians viewed the US Constitution as a flawed product of modern thought, East Coast Straussians cherished it for its protections and for the ability of its natural rights myths to inspire devotion among the masses, whilst West Coast Straussians like Harry Jaffa viewed it as something incomplete. For Jaffa, it was the duty of later leaders, such as the 'Socratic' Abraham Lincoln, to perfect the American regime. Willmoore Kendall, when reviewing Jaffa's *Crisis of the House Divided* back in 1959, had identified a potential peril in Jaffa's veneration of 'Great Leaders' like Lincoln. According to Kendall, Jaffa's reasoning could be used to justify 'a future made up of an endless series of Abraham Lincolns, each persuaded that he is superior in wisdom and virtue to the Fathers'.[10] Whilst West Coast Straussians therefore take the study of 'statesmanship' extremely seriously, East Coast Straussians are more likely to worry that any new constitution-changing politician might be a potential tyrant. As Strauss had argued in his interpretation of Xenophon's *Hiero*, even a benevolent and wise tyrant inevitably damages the citizenry's ability to rule itself.

Beyond these existing factions who embraced or rejected Trump, the 2016 election also strikingly revealed the emergence of a new grouping on the Right. The bogeyman of the election in the mainstream media was the alternative right (or alt-right), the name given to an amorphous group of diverse voices, perhaps closest ideologically to the paleo-conservatives in their distrust of foreign interventionism and mass immigration (but containing some voices associated with neo-Nazism). They were classified together because of their shared use of social media. For the classicist Donna Zuckerberg,[11] the alt-right is constituted by the 'forces of white supremacy and toxic masculinity'. They represent a particularly pernicious threat to Classics because they are so enamoured of Antiquity. According to Zuckerberg, their influence may mean that Classics will be supported by the Trump administration just 'as it was in Nazi Germany'. Classicists must therefore push back by resisting claims that Antiquity is 'the foundation of western civilization and culture' because 'such ideas are a slippery slope to white supremacy'. Unless classicists 'resist', we will have 'to live through a second wave of fascist classical reception'. The notion that positing Antiquity as a source for Western civilization puts one in the same league as white supremacists might seem somewhat hyperbolic (as does the collocation of the Trump administration and Nazi Germany). And the alt-right's tiny presence in the physical world should lead us to query its supposed importance (there may be an echo here of neoconservatives being happy to exaggerate their influence over the George W. Bush administration: do internet memes win elections?);[12] however, their appropriations of classical Greece do provide further evidence for the allure of Antiquity for many on the Right.

As we can see, even in debates over this very short span of time, the flexibility of ancient Greece as a tool for political writers are amply apparent. Looking at the period covered by this book as a whole, the multifarious political appropriations of Antiquity can be summarized under two main headings: firstly, the radical, as a powerful tool to think with, to take on a new perspective from which to challenge dominant assumptions; and secondly, the traditional, where classical thought has been used because of an inability to engage head-on with radical critiques, and in which it becomes a shield with which to defend traditionalism without needing to think through the assaults upon it. We may also query what conservatives have gained from the Classics.

Was it superficial window-dressing, or were there ideas which directly influenced conservative approaches to policy issues? The fluidity of conservatism, which has taken different directions and had a number of competing factions since World War II, means there may be more than one answer to this question. At times, episodes from Greek history were used as warnings or to provide lessons for America. At other times the ideas of the Greeks, used and adapted to fit the American context, provided conservatives with another perspective on American challenges. One recurring, but not always dominant, theme was a longer narrative arc tied to the idea and ideal of 'the West'; though even here there were contradictions. In one tradition, exemplified by William Bennett and Victor Davis Hanson, nourished by ideas of American exceptionalism which posited America as the pinnacle of Western civilization, Greece has been lauded as the alpha to America's omega. At the other extreme, epitomized by critics of American modernity such as Allan Bloom and Richard Weaver, an idealized Greece was a yardstick against which to measure just how far short America had fallen.

To some degree this diversity reflects the variety of the source material: the Greeks did not agree among themselves, so we should not be astonished that appropriations of anything as amorphous as 'Greekness' have tended to be nuanced and contested. In part this is also due to the extended time period with which this book is concerned. We do not have to engage in historical determinism to accept that debates tend to be shaped by the exigencies of their political and social contexts. In the second half of the twentieth century, American political debates have weaved and looped along different tracks; and conservatism has altered course and emphasis in response, leading to further shifts in the perceived usefulness of ancient Greece and its ideas.

Despite no single thread or dominant approach emerging within American conservatism, certain modes and tropes tended to be repeated at different times. A key difference between the conservatives and their progressive opponents was their differing view of the malleability of human nature. Conservatives believed in eternal, inherent human traits, good and bad, whereas progressives tended to blame human weaknesses on society – a rebuilding of society could lead to improved human beings. If such government-led schemes did not work as advertised, conservatives responded that the reason was their divorce from reality, captured in Irving Kristol's dictum that a neoconservative was a 'liberal

who has been mugged by reality'. Weaver and Kendall both opposed what they viewed as the inherent relativism of liberalism. Strauss opposed the relativism at the heart of what he labelled 'radical historicism'. Neoconservatives rebelled against the value neutrality of Weberian social science. Education polemicists of the 1980s also rebelled against trends which seemed to relativize truth. There was more here than using the cachet of Antiquity to combat modern 'isms'. The Greek sophists did seem to predate certain modern 'isms', such as relativism and the flexibility of 'the weak argument defeating the stronger', which seems to anticipate modern (and post-modern) concerns over the fluidity and unsecured nature of linguistic meaning. And in such a world without bearings, the Greek philosophical response, which seemed to concretely reconnect thought, language and objective reality, repeatedly enticed thinkers uncomfortable with (post-)modernity.

This is not to endorse a view of Strauss's 'permanent problems', to suggest that the issues the Greeks grappled with should forever hold primacy over other debates. Bloom's falling back onto prosaic conservative tropes over affirmative action shows how such an approach can leave its user at a loss when new issues emerge. However, as long as some people view values as radically subjective, there will be others who hark back to a simpler, more explanatory view of the cosmos. With its complex fusion of the familiar and the alien, Greek Antiquity is likely to remain an excellent tool with which to think.

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Introduction

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Chapter 1 Plato's Ideas had Consequences: Greek Thought and the 'New Conservatives'

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90. Ibid., 67.
91. Ibid., 109–11.
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93. Ibid., 132.
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Chapter 2 Leo Strauss and the Ancients against the Moderns

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Chapter 3 Rise of the Neoconservatives

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